

# CEMETERY DANCE

ISSUE #49

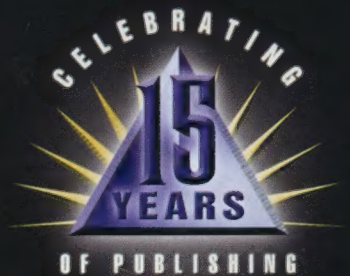
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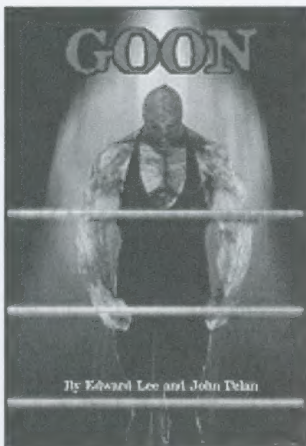
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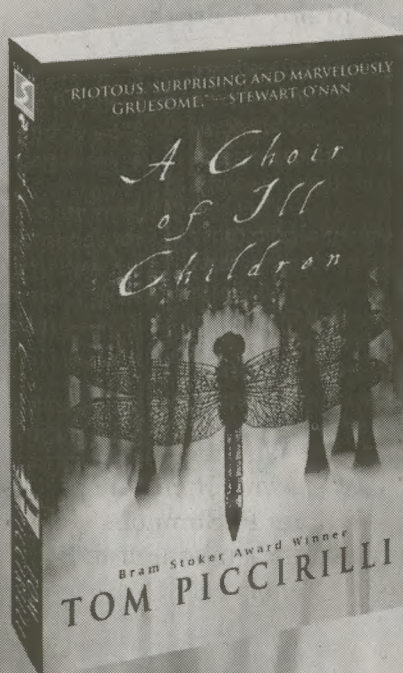
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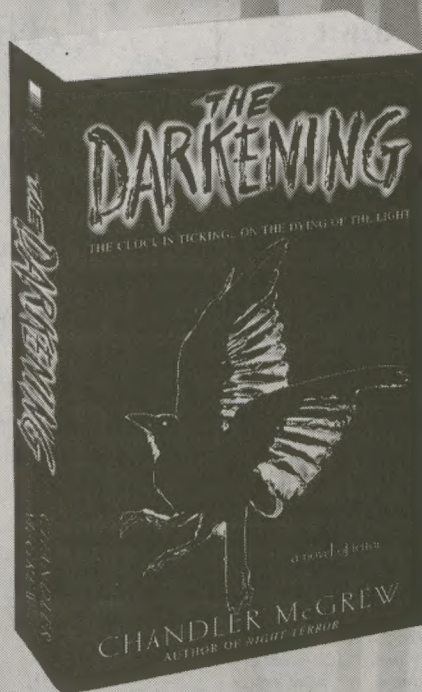
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# Words From the Editors

WELCOME to issue #49 of *Cemetery Dance*, waltzing your way with more than a hundred pages of fiction and reviews.

This issue features one of our longest stories ever—Sherry Decker's "Hook House"—as well as one of our shortest—Lawrence C. Connolly's "Striking Terror." Along with our usual array of fiction and non-fiction, you'll find the return of William P. Simmon's "Our Ladies of Darkness" interview series, although this issue's installment, with Nancy Holder, is guest-conducted by Hank Wagner. Upcoming issues will feature interviews with a number of horror's most frightening femmes, and several of the interviewees will also be contributing stories to the pages of CD (as Nancy Holder does in this issue).



By now many of you will have heard about the health problems facing legendary horror author Charles L. Grant, whose column "Ramblings from the Dark" appeared here in CD for many years. Grant, who has been hospitalized since early March with severe cardiopulmonary disease and emphysema, has no medical insurance and faces major medical expenses. A two-part fundraiser conducted by the Horror Writers Association will be over by the time you read this, but check the website ([www.gilaqueen.us](http://www.gilaqueen.us)) of Grant's wife, Kathryn Ptacek, for information on how you can help.



As mentioned last issue, we have big plans for issue #50. It'll be one of our biggest issues ever, with contributions from the likes of Gary Braunbeck, Ramsey Campbell, Ray Garton, Glen Hirshberg, and Norman Partridge, among many others.

A special 200-copy hardcover edition of issue #50 sold out within hours of being announced, but the success of that edition has prompted us to offer hardcover editions of every issue. See page 55 for details on subscribing to the hardcover series.



As always, we'd love to hear your thoughts on the magazine—what you liked, what you didn't, what you'd like to see more of. Please feel free to email *your* comments to [info@cemeterydance.com](mailto:info@cemeterydance.com), or mail to P.O. Box 623, Forest Hill, MD 21050.

Enough said. I hope you enjoy the latest *Dance*.  
Until next time...

—Robert Morrish  
<[morrish@cemeterydance.com](mailto:morrish@cemeterydance.com)>

HELLO again and welcome back to another issue of *Cemetery Dance* magazine. Issue #49, believe it or not. Lots of goodies lined up for our big 50th issue—including some nice surprises not yet revealed by my not-so-secretive co-editor. I hope you enjoy this issue as much as we enjoyed putting it together, and I hope you come back for our little celebration next time around.



Confessions of an editor (who is running late with his editorial and has nothing of substance to say, hence this space-chewing rumination):

If you're like me, you read just about everywhere. No place is safe. Breakfast, lunch, dinner table. In the car—at stoplights...approaching stoplights...leaving stoplights (okay, I admit it, I've read while driving; not so smart, I know). Baseball games. Inside stores. Taking walks. The list is endless. And don't even get me started about *what* I read. If it has words printed on it, I've read it. It's always been like this—my entire family were readers—ever since I was a kid and my sisters and I used to fight over the best cereal box because we all wanted to read the back of it (we weren't allowed reading material at the table in those days). If I have a point, it's this: I grew up surrounded by a love for reading. It was a wonderful gift, and it's why I do what I do today. And it's something that has been passed on to my own children. We finish eating dinner in a restaurant and they read their piles of books (well, okay, they look at the pictures and ask questions). We drive down the road in the van and they read their magazines or Look-and-Find books in the back seat. They do it because they love it, not because they have to. And that's how it should be.

Unlike some in specialty press publishing, I don't necessarily believe that an ultra-small print run is a good thing. Or that it does a service for the collectors. Frankly, in 90% of the cases, with 90% of the authors and titles involved, the difference between a print run of 250 copies and 500 copies is negligible when it comes to those books appreciating in value. In almost all cases, it just doesn't matter.

So why do it, other than to save printing expenses? And what about the authors? As a publisher, you have an equal responsibility to your writers. To sell their books to as many readers as possible, to actually make them a few bucks. Why limit their readership so severely before the book even hits the open market? Why limit potential sales and resulting potential earnings for their hard work? And all in the hope of making the book more collectible? C'mon, print a couple hundred extra copies, find a way to sell them, do the work—your writer will thank you. That's part of the job, you know—we're supposed to keep their books in print, to actively promote them to various markets, to help them expand their audiences and earn bigger paychecks. Not cater exclusively to a small group of ultra-collectors. It's just not right. And it doesn't make sense. At least not for the authors...



Wait a minute. I do have one fairly important thing to say. By the time you read this, the next issue of *Grave Tales* should be safely at the printer. We've made some changes, folks. Both in content and design. All for the good, I believe. More explanation coming, but rest assured you're going to see a lot more of this old-fashioned horror comic in the days to come.

Okay, that's all until next time. Now, turn down the lights, flip the page, take my hand, and start the dance...

—Richard Chizmar

# Our Ladies of Darkness

## A Conversation with

---

# NANCY HOLDER

guest installment by Hank Wagner

AFTER PENNING SEVERAL romance novels in the eighties, Nancy Holder broke into the horror genre with an appearance in *Shadows 8* ("Blood Gothic") in 1985. In 1993, she co-authored the novel *Making Love* with Melanie Tem; she again teamed with Tem in 1996 to produce *Witch Light*, the second entry in the duo's *Demon Lovers* series. In 1994, she penned the solo novel *Dead in the Water*, for which she won a Bram Stoker Award.

Holder is probably most well known for her short stories, which critic Don D'Amassa characterized as "powerful" and "stylish." Holder has written over 100 short stories, including the notorious "Cannibal Cats Come Out Tonight" and "Cannibal Dwight's Special Purpose." She's picked up three additional Stokers for her short work, winning the awards for her stories "Lady Madonna," "I Hear The Mermaids Singing," and "Café Endless: Spring Rain."

Recent work has included her "Gambler's Star" series (a science fiction series that could best be described as "Wiseguy on the Moon") and over four dozen media tie-ins, including novels and viewer's guides relating to the *Smallville*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Highlander*, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, and *Angel* television series.

Since 1996, she has split her time between writing and caring for her daughter Belle, who has been heard to say, "For it to be fun, there has to be some screaming."

Sounds like the apple didn't fall too far from the tree.

**CD** Can you provide a little personal background? For instance, where do you hail from? How, if at all,

have your origins colored your writing?

**NH** I was born in Northern California, and I lived there until I was around six. Then we moved to San Diego, and then to Japan, and back to California. My father was a psychiatrist in the Navy. He was on his last tour of duty when he died of a heart attack. I had just dropped out of high school and moved to Germany to become a dancer. I came home for the funeral and my stepmother persuaded me to finish high school before I went back to Europe. I did that, and by then, at 18, I had fallen behind training-wise. I did go back to Germany for a year, but I realized I was no longer going to have a shot at becoming a real ballerina. I eventually went to college at UC San Diego. One of my close college friends was Ray Feist, the fantasy writer.

I was recently reading my diary from this time and what struck me was the intense depression I fell into after my father died. My family was not a happy one; both my parents were alcoholics, and both died of the disease. I spent a lot of my childhood staying out of the way by reading and watching TV. I also wrote. In the sixth grade, I wrote a fantasy novel about a quest to revive a dead king and queen, and I wrote a lot of poetry. I wrote a movie about a monster because I had gotten a hideous black wig for Halloween and I couldn't stop imagining gory scenes starring that wig.

My father was fascinated by language and he admired my artistic bent. He was in the sciences, which were more "cookbook," as he put it, but now that I'm older I'm amazed he thought psychiatry had no creative aspect to it. He thought it would be wonderful if I

became a writer, and my grandmother, who was generally rather critical of me, encouraged me as well. I tucked that away, but I was still determined to become a dancer.

Though I started out at UCSD as a linguistics major, I took my cue from Ray and switched to communications, because we could take as many writing classes as we wanted. I was heavily influenced by Dr. John Waterhouse, who had a lot of faith in my ability and encouraged me to send things out. Nothing sold. I planned to become a speech pathologist, but his letter of recommendation reiterated his belief that I could become a successful writer, and I eventually quit grad school to write full-time. I sold my first novel about a year-and-a-half later.

**CD** Did you ever consider writing more mainstream fiction, or do you naturally gravitate towards the horrific and fantastic?

**NH** I originally wrote fantasy, and then I discovered historical novels. I was hooked on Tudor England. Historical romances were popular then, and I tried to write one. It takes place in 1828, and it has never sold. But I did get my first agent with it.

I have written some mainstream fiction, most notably a novel about the film industry that is out of print, and another one about a country-Western singer that one editor told me he read because the heroine is wearing Spandex on the cover. I've also done short fiction and I've written some non-horror erotica. I also wrote a young adult novel about Pearl Harbor. My family has very strong ties to the Islands; my aunt witnessed the attack and my grandfather was the first

director of Kula Sanatorium on Maui during that time.

But the horrific and fantastic is where I am most comfortable. It's what I read and what I watch. It's my world, and it's where my friends live. I can drop into it so easily; one night I went to two genre films in a row and I was coming home to an empty house. I knew my daughter's My Size Barbie was sitting in the foyer facing the front door, and I was too scared to open the door and see her there. So I checked into a motel.

**CD** Can you describe a typical workday? Are you disciplined, or do you write whenever the mood strikes you?

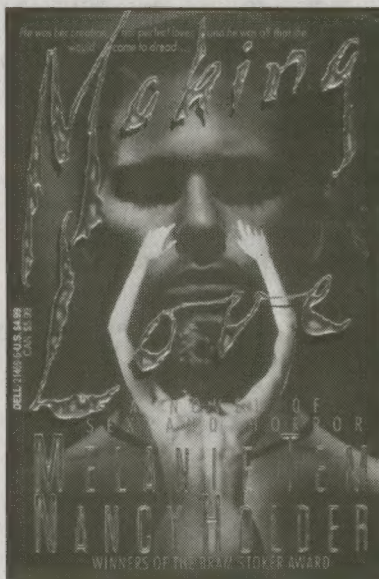
**NH** I have to be disciplined. I am the single mom of a 7-year-old, and I have to work whenever I can. I won't put her in after-school care, and I try to give her a reasonable number of activities to participate in. However, I get easily distracted by email and the IM monster.

I tried getting up very, very early, and I flopped. But I think I'm going to have to go back to that. My daughter's school starts at 7:45 a.m., so I can't follow my natural inclination to work until 1 a.m. or so. I have to go to bed early. It is difficult to convey how contrary to my nature that is.

**CD** You've collaborated with several authors over the course of your career. What's been your experience with collaboration? Easier? Harder? Did you learn anything from the experience?

**NH** I love collaborating. I would love to do more of it. Writing is so solitary and isolating. If I had it to do over, I would try to work in TV, get on a show, and work with other writers and the creative team. I know now that I have the ability, and I understand the process. I've read hundreds of scripts and I know I have what it takes. As an industry friend of mine once observed, I'm good at taking assignments and I'm fine with notes and revisions. I don't get angry when I'm asked to make changes that I think are capricious, though I do try to keep my original vision when I think my bosses are wrong or uninformed.

Collaboration gives me companionship and lets me watch another person's creative process. That's invaluable to me. It also makes me stay precise and clear. If my coauthor doesn't understand why I

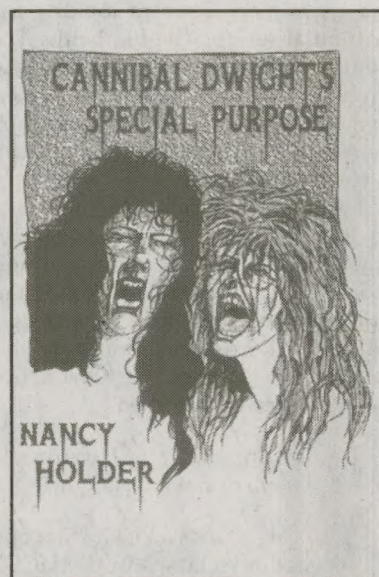


did X or Y, then I have to assume a reader isn't going to understand, either. It's a terrific situation for me. It helps me keep on task and get my work done in a timely fashion, because someone is waiting on the other end of the computer for it. And it's fun. It's creatively nourishing.

I've learned to plot a lot better as a result of collaborating, and I've also gotten better at narrative flow. I have very little to say that's negative about collaboration.

**CD** What's the hardest effect to achieve in a horror novel?

**NH** The most difficult effect is to get readers to invest emotionally. They have to buy into your world, believe in your characters, and give a



damn about what happens to them. That's a tall order. Literary fiction takes the world we already live in and deconstructs it. Mysteries as well. But as we move along the continuum of the fantastical—from psychological horror to supernatural horror to science fiction and high fantasy a la Peter Jackson—we have to establish the ordinary world as well as the rifts that occur in it. There's been so much published that you have to find a way to entice and engage people. They need to breathe your premise. And the ending is crucial. Failure to deliver on the original promise is death.

The son of one of my co-authors, Jeff Mariotte, loves Scooby Doo. One day Jeff said to him, "Why do you like that show so much? It's always a guy in a suit." His son said, "But Dad, it's always a different guy in a different suit!" He's getting what he wants. He's invested. He's getting the payoff he's looking for. That's the job.

**CD** What form do you prefer to work in, short story, novella, novel?

**NH** If I could make a living at short stories, I would write short stories from here on out. But I can't. But there's a way around that. Anne Lamott talks about breaking down your work so that you're approaching it at a "bird by bird" level (read the book to understand the analogy!), which I do. I have everything planned day by day, so in that way, it feels almost like short-story writing to me. But novels are my standard work of choice.

**CD** What does your family and friends think of your profession?

**NH** My daughter doesn't want me to be a writer because she thinks I have to work too hard. Others are a little star-struck, even after all this time. I don't think they understand the pressure I'm under, both to produce and to line up the next gig. Freelancers scramble a lot. That part gets tiring. My friends and relatives have jobs and for the most part, portable skills, and they don't understand that when I'm not writing, I'm not earning. They seem to have a healthy sense of competence and a surety that they will always be employed. That fascinates me.

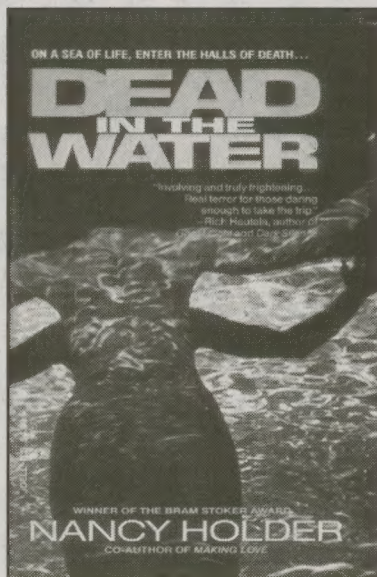
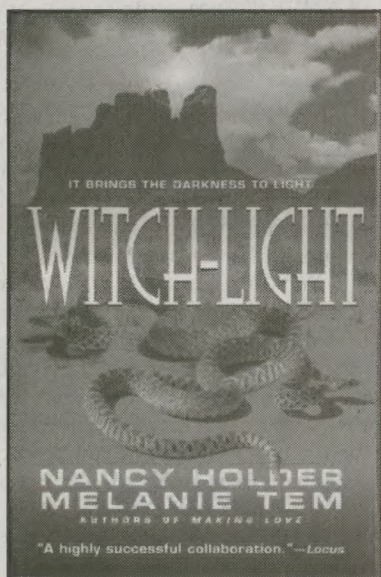
Even after all this time, I take nothing in this business for granted. I

have a number of writer friends who are middle-aged and struggling in this profession, and that terrifies me. I don't want to go there. I want to do good work and by doing so, get more work to do. But the writing industry is not a meritocracy, and sometimes I have to quell the terror demons by concentrating solely on my craft. It's said that if you do what you love, the money will follow. I try to have faith in that...and to live beneath my means, just in case.

**CD** Which of your works would you recommend to someone who has never read any of your fiction?

**NH** My standard answer has become *Child of the Hunt*, which is a Buffy novel I wrote with Chris Golden. I can't remember why any more. I think that it's partly a defensive posture, because I have also written very extreme, gross horror, and I don't come off as someone who writes tough and bloody in the world of my everyday life. I think it was Ed Bryant who once called me "the only splatterpunk who chews with her mouth closed." I have a bourgeoisie persona, which I think I cultivated in part because I grew up in a military family where exteriors were everything. It's generally easier to get good service in restaurants and free checking at the bank if you don't look like a freak.

After people have met me, when they pick up my extreme stuff, they're shocked; they assume the ultra violence gets written by the folks with all the piercings. Short fiction-wise, "Crash



Cart" and "Café Endless: Spring Rain" are probably my favorites. I've written a lot of short fiction I'm very proud of.

I received a Stoker for *Dead in the Water*, and I worked like a dog on it for over two years. I haven't read it in a while, so I don't know how it stands up now. I should also add that I am very proud of *Making Love*, which I co-wrote with the fabulous and wonderful Melanie Tem.

**CD** What's the most important ingredient to a written work: atmosphere/setting/backdrop, character, plotting, action/set pieces?

**NH** If it's a novel, character and plotting, hands down. If it's a tie-in, you have to make sure to have the set pieces or the fans will feel cheated, and rightly so. They're looking for that initial set-up. The big battle. The moment when all seems lost. You have to linger long and lovingly on those scenes, give the characters great lines, and just really push it all onto the page as much as you can.

With short fiction, I love to take my time on characterization and atmosphere. But that's only once the reader and I have agreed to go there. If I'm writing a short story for a show, then I still need to keep a good plot going, and stay as true as I can to the characterization that's been established.

**CD** Is writing intuitive? Is it an innate talent, or can it be taught?

**NH** This sounds a lot like the copy for my classes in the UCSD

course catalog! I teach creative writing at my alma mater now. I feel that the specific elements of craft—characterization, plotting, and the lot—can definitely be taught. There are tools of the trade and there are tons of books about them. I teach at the Maui Writers Retreat with fantastic writing teachers and I have learned an incredible amount about writing from listening to their lectures and looking at their curricula.

I also believe that most people are far more talented than they realize. That talent can be nurtured, and that's what I strive for in my classes. I want my students to take themselves seriously, to believe in themselves. To take a shot at the notion that they can be successful. They can sell. Why the hell not?

I start all my classes by asking what Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, John Grisham, Anne Rice, etc., etc., have in common. I let the students guess wrong for a while, and then I add in God. No one ever gets it.

The answer is that they all started out unpublished.

**CD** You've picked up some awards during your career. How do you feel about awards in general?

**NH** I've received four Bram Stoker awards, three for short story and one for novel. I was nominated for a fifth. I also received a special sales award from Amazon.com. A number of my books have appeared in the top five rankings, on regular Amazon and the British version. I've also received a lot of awards from teen magazines that I





can't remember any more, unfortunately. Most of those were for the Buffy/Angel companion guides to the show. I was working so hard when I was getting them that I didn't keep track of them, and neither did anyone else.

It is so difficult to make a living as a writer, and as Annie Dillard has pointed out, it is at least externally a rather mundane existence. I sit in a room and type. The things I worry about are point of view shifts and if I have too much expository narrative. Most people have no idea what the hell I'm talking about. They don't get that. So it's nice to receive some notice, be it an award or a congratulatory email from a reader or a colleague. Since the Stokers have been given to me by my peers, it has meant a lot to me to receive them.

**CD** What's the most surprising thing a critic ever wrote about one of your books? In retrospect, was the critic off base?

**NH** A British reviewer said I wrote the best King Neptune-cabin

boy fellatio scene he had ever read, in *Dead in the Water*. Since that was my Stoker-award winning novel, I figure he was right.

**CD** What inspired your latest novel?

**NH** I just finished *BTVS/Angel: Heat*, which features a character who appeared early on in the *Angel* show: Jhiera. It's about warmth and heat and fires and burning with desire. It has the terracotta warriors from China in it. Interestingly enough, I wrote part of it after I was evacuated during the Scripps Ranch/Cedar fire here in San Diego. 350 homes went up in my neighborhood. All I took when I was evacuated was my G3, my laptop, my notes, a pair of underwear, a fresh T-shirt, and a clean pair of socks. Also two of my three animals—the second cat, David, ran away from me. But she (David is a girl) returned and we are reunited.

By the way, I organized a book drive for the victims of that fire. Thanks to Melissa Mia Hall, *Publishers Weekly*

ran my press release, and I got fantastic response from the industry. We received lots of donations from publishers, sales reps, and individual authors such as Laurell Hamilton, Kevin Anderson and Rebecca Moesta, and many others. The co-exec producer of *Angel*, David Fury, sent me Magic Treehouse and Nancy Drew.

**CD** How has your style, voice, approach evolved over your career?

**NH** I started out emulating my idol, Charles L. Grant. I wrote quiet literary horror that my agent didn't understand. Then every once in a while, my own voice would echo in the dark antique library. I'm noisier and brasher, and more direct when I'm "myself." When Buffy came on the air, I actually started crying because it sounded like me. The Buffy scripts are masterpieces of honesty and beauty, and the show is filled with a level of compassion that still moves me to tears.

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# Memorial Day



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MEMORIAL DAY (A MICK CALLAHAN NOVEL) BY HARRY SHANNON  
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**CD** Have your creative goals changed?

**NH** My creative goals have definitely changed. I am a much more direct writer. I work hard to be clear, and to have flow and movement that make sense. In the early days, an interviewer said very matter-of-factly to me, "Of course your work is so nebulous, and it's become more nebulous over time." He compared me to two prominent horror writers he felt were part of this great nebulous trend. I was alarmed. I felt like he had caught me jerking off.

At one of the World Horror Cons, I held my own Nebu-Con and gave a grandmaster award to the other horror author in attendance. I got Most Promising Nebulous Newcomer.

I love how words sound; I love the effect of words put together in different ways. That's one definition of a literary writer. But I can't rely solely on style or it becomes affected and, well, nebulous.

I try to tell a story with a beginning, middle and an end. In the early days, I just wanted to scare people. I didn't care if the story made sense. I was after the reaction, plain and simple. It is possible to come in so far under the radar that a person can react to a piece of writing without really getting why. I try to go for that in appropriate venues. An anthology of edgy stuff, things like that.

**CD** What challenges do you set for yourself when you write?

**NH** I'm working a lot harder on my plots. I try not to dodge or fudge the details. I try to work all the kinks out so I can ride the structure and concentrate on my actual writing. That's not to say I don't allow for serendipity and surprise. But I do slow down and mull things over a lot more than I used to. I used to think along the lines of, "We'll fix it in post-production." But now I try to keep things running smoothly all the way through the book.

I try not to lapse into old ways of saying things. I look for new ways to use the language that aren't just masturbatory indulgences—"look at me! I'm a wordsmith!"

**CD** What draws you to dark fiction?

**NH** I was always interested in scary stuff, even though I hated it. I

was terrified of the dark when I was a little girl. I had horrible insomnia. And yet, I couldn't stay away from the books and the movies. Maybe it's the same kind of whacked-out gene that compels some people to do stunt work. I feel like a particular kind of warrior that I can take a good, long look into the shadows and report back what I see—which is a paraphrase of Clive Barker's take on speculative fiction writers. It makes me feel braver than I think I am. And it's like being a sineater—articulating the dark thoughts we all have. You think it, I say it.

**CD** Do you regret taking a particular scene too far in any of your works?

**NH** Yes. In one of the Wicked books that I coauthored with Debbie Viguie, I killed a cat. It was "artistically necessary," but I have had no end of grief over it. Never kill a cat. Or a dog.

**CD** Who are your main literary influences? Who do you admire in the genre?

**NH** I would never mention the living for fear I'll forget someone. My idol of all time is Shirley Jackson. Could that chick write! Dylan Thomas. I've quoted him a number of times. "It is spring, moonless night." Under Milkwood. Ghost poems. Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Fantastic and fabulous.

**CD** Outside the genre?

**NH** I really do like Shakespeare. There's someone who did not flinch from going over the top whenever he damn well felt like it. What a ham.

**CD** What do you read when you read for pleasure?

**NH** It's been a long time since I just sat down and read. Right now I'm reading *The Last of the Mohicans* in preparation for a novel of my own that is essentially a fantasy-based cover of James Fenimore Cooper.

**CD** Have you had any mentors in your career? If so, what did they teach you?

**NH** Charlie Grant taught me to follow my heart. Chris Golden

taught me how to write action and how to do structure. Melanie Tem and Elizabeth Engstrom taught me to write with integrity.

**CD** Have you been following the controversy over the National Book Award going to Stephen King? If so, how do you feel about the whole thing? Do you believe critics are condescending in their attitudes towards horror?

**NH** I think he was absolutely correct when he said that they gave him the award because he was Stephen King, not because of his work. I think critics are condescending in the extreme toward horror.

**CD** Do you revise or just go with the first draft?

**NH** I revise constantly. I revise as I go. I revise just before I hit send. I wake myself up dreaming about revising. That is one of the pluses of collaboration; the other guy can scream, "Just send it to me, for God's sake!"

**CD** Research? How difficult? Methods? Sources? Do you do it yourself, or do you have an assistant?

**NH** I research all my stuff myself. It's easier with the net, although it's hard to check sources sometimes. I'm on a fabulous women writers list and I have a lot of friends I can ask questions of. Writer Steve Perry and a digital effects geek named Sam Devol are my gun guys. I have voodoo friends and Wicca friends. I wish I had the resources for a research assistant, but I figure I'd miss a lot of cool weird stuff that way, so it's probably for the best.

**CD** Outlining?

**NH** Absolutely. I sell on outline most of the time. I try to have a more elaborate outline in place than what I sell on, once I get going. It makes life easier, and I depart from it when I can, if I need to.

**CD** What do you perceive as your strengths as a writer? Your weaknesses?

**NH** I have a lot of compassion and empathy, and I have a wide and deep emotional range. I say things

that sometimes other writers are embarrassed to say. My weakness is that I have a lot of hubris and assume that the corner I'm writing myself into will disappear. I'll catch it in post, as they say in LA. That isn't always the case.

**CD** Do you think you bring anything special to your fiction as a woman? Is there a difference between men and women writers? Do they bring different talents/tools/perspectives to the table?

**NH** Ah, the age-old questions. Kathy Ptacek got roasted alive for editing *Women of Darkness I and II*. But in the early days, we women did not get asked to be in anthologies as often as our brothers. We really didn't. And I got told to my face that women couldn't write splat, couldn't be frightening, and couldn't produce bestsellers.

For God's sake.

I honestly think we're generally better at characterization, but if so, not by much. I think that may be a factor of our being socialized or hardwired—take your pick—for consensual communal activities. But frankly, good is good, whether a person dangles or bleeds.

**CD** You've written quite a number of media tie-ins, most centering on the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* properties. I assume you have a bit of affection for both shows?

**NH** Hate 'em. Can't stand 'em. Of course I adore them! As I said before, I wept during the premiere of *Buffy*. And I cheered when *Angel* spun off. The night *Buffy* ended, I put a Barbie puzzle together with my daughter and watched the clock. It was like sitting shiva. I had read the script. I thought it ended so well. I finally watched the broadcast about a week later.

I loved doing *Sabrina The Teenage Witch*. It's such a light-hearted show. I adore *Smallville*. *Joan of Arcadia*. And *American Dreams*.

**CD** How'd you get the gig? What's it like playing in someone else's sandbox? Describe the joys and sorrows of doing this kind of work.

**NH** I was approached by Alice Alfonsi, who was bidding on the rights to *Buffy* for Random House. I had already done a *Highlander* tie-in, so I had some street cred. Scott Ciencin put

us together. She didn't get the rights, but I found out quickly who did get them. I invited Christopher Golden to work with me, and we sent a bunch of ideas to Lisa Clancy at Simon and Schuster. We were on the clock less than forty-eight hours later, and we wrote our first novel in 3 1/2 weeks. I worked for Lisa for seven years. She recently left and I'm still working for Simon and Schuster, thank goodness.

The joys are many—it's fun and there is such incredible fan response. I get invited to great parties. I was invited to the showing of the end of *Highlander* and Adrian Paul fixed my camera so I could take shots of him with my infant daughter. I've been to almost all the Posting Board Parties. Between *Buffy* and *Angel* I've been on set a whole bunch of times. In fact, Joss fixed my tape recorder once—I have incredible bad luck with mechanical objects. There was a time when I knew all the *Buffy* staff and the guards would just saunter by and wave when I was working in the production offices. I'm going to be a keynote speaker at the Slayage conference in Nashville over Memorial Day. That's fun stuff.

I've made great friends along the way, and some of them have given me some fantastic jobs. I try to return the favor when I can.

The sorrows are that I won't get rich doing them, and they're work for hire. I don't own the copyrights to any of my tie-in material. I got approached by a British film company today regarding a *Buffy* story I wrote, and I had to tell them I had no right to negotiate anything with them. The good news is that they're happy to get something different from me.

As far as working in someone else's sandbox, I'm completely fine with it. I have loved all the shows I've worked on, and it's really fun to feel like part of the magic. Artistically, I've gotten to say what I want/needed to say. The downside is that there have been times where what I wrote contradicted what the show was doing, and I had to rewrite it because the show is canon. I had to rewrite *Blood and Fog* very, very quickly, because it was all about The First. In *The Evil That Men Do*, I wanted to invent a dark Slayer, and that was nixed because Faith was coming.

**CD** How do you respond to those who feel that media tie-ins are hackwork?

**NH** I really don't care what anyone thinks, unless they decide not to offer me a job because I've done tie-ins. The very first panel I was on at my very first World Fantasy Convention, all the other panelists were mocking writers who stooped to do tie-ins. Less than a decade later, all of them had done at least one tie-in.

I have a body of work now that I'm quite proud of. I have my "own" stuff, which has been recognized as worthy by my peers. I'm too busy being a mom and working to worry too much about if someone thinks I'm a hack.

**CD** Do you allow Belle to watch the shows? Does she want to?

**NH** Belle is not allowed to watch TV at my house at all. She watches tons of it at her dad's, so when she's here, the set stays off. Except for videos, and they have to be G-rated.

**CD** Tell us a bit about your upcoming projects. What's next for you?

**NH** *Buffy/Angel: Heat* will be coming out, and right now I'm working on *Spirited*, which is a YA retelling of Beauty and the Beast set during the French and Indian War (hence my reading *The Last of the Mohicans*.) I've got a Spike-centric proposal in and I'm doing a proposal for a very cool *Buffy* thing I can't talk about. I'm working on some other proposals for other things, too. I'm also writing an essay about Spike for the new *Angel* book of essays that will come out from BenBella Books in Texas.

I'll be teaching a couple of classes at UC San Diego starting in February, and then in August at the Maui Writers Retreat. One of my most recent accomplishments is the discovery of my writing partner, Debbie Viguie. She was a student of mine at Maui. We wrote four books together, and she's gone on to sell three more on her own. That is so incredibly cool.



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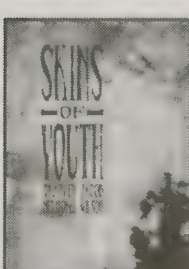
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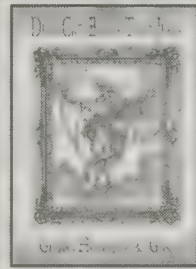
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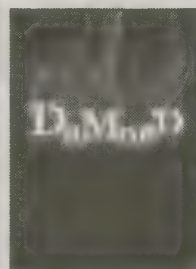
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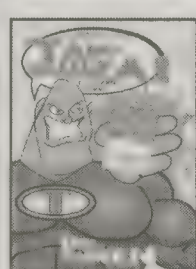
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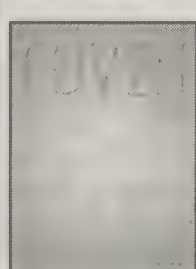


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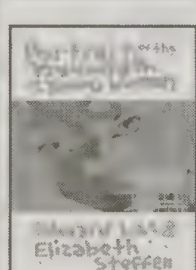
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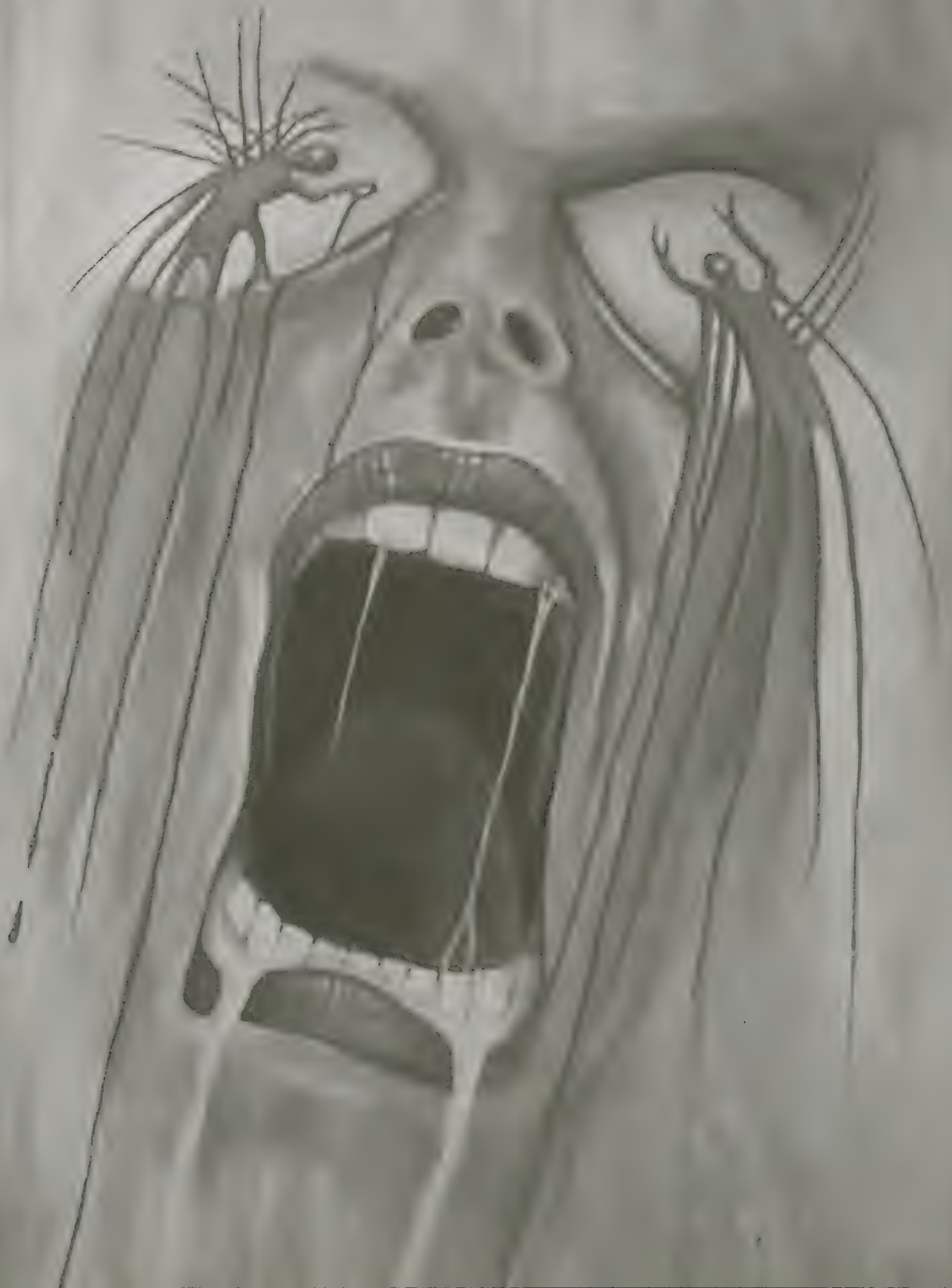
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# HIDE, WITCH, HIDE

Nancy Holder

*The Burning Times: 1550-1560; the trial and execution of persons, usually women, for witchcraft or other heresies. An estimated 50,000 to 100,000 were killed, the majority hung or burned alive.*

“Just carry so much shame,” Rita told Izzy, and the younger woman nodded sagely. An odalisque or a reclining Buddha; the jury was still out.

*Shame is a luxury problem; shame is for people life hasn't lashed to the stake. Shame is for people who aren't starving or dying of curable diseases. The truly, truly desperate don't have time for shame.*

*In Africa, the enemies of the State are necklaced: trussed and helpless, burning tires forced around their torsos. Force and torso, say it with me.*

*The somnolence of words is a luxury problem.*

*I can't tell anyone.*

Sixteen years free, Izzy lounged on her bed, her wet magenta fingernails crossed over her lap, not so much resembling a sponsor in a twelve-step program as Fu Manchu. Her face was pale and her cheeks and lips were dark; and her eyes rimmed with kohl like those of a French Pierrot or some exquisite child bride from Afghanistan. She was not sleek but she excelled at self-care; she smelled like spicy Egyptian unguent and her bedroom in the large, many-chambered Victorian was a pleasure dome: candles glowed; incense wafted; a Mapplethorpe nude undulated on the purple-and-cream sponged wall.

Sometimes Rita felt ridiculous around Izzy, Rita in her subdued makeup and her short, styled hair; her ultra-thin body swathed in protective layers of navy blue and olive. Rita's single bangle bracelet, a recent attempt at being nice to herself, paltry and half-hearted.

*Izzy had no clue. Izzy could just dream.*

*What am I doing here? Her bedroom is like a movie set. None of this is real.*

*Let people like Izzy threaten to jump off a cliff.*

“I'm here to help you drop the rock,” Izzy reminded her, as she moved her shoulders up and down, then rolled them forward and backward. “You're going to feel so much better once you let go. I promise you. It really does get better.”

Rita flashed a pained smile and looked down at her hands. The diamond on her wedding ring was enormous. The most recent time that she'd had to use a match, she had stared at that glittering rock until she became convinced that she was Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid, staring plaintively out to sea from her boulder in Copenhagen Harbor. Water was a big metaphor for her. It quenched the flames.

Last summer she had gone to Copenhagen with her husband and daughter. They'd taken tours and gazed at the glittering lights of Tivoli Gardens. She had bought a very expensive wool sweater and an amber necklace for Gina. For herself, this single bangle bracelet, fashioned of pewter Celtic knots.

Seeing it around her wrist was like hearing her own death sentence.

*I am so crazy. This girl has no idea how crazy I am. She can't help me. She was a little junkie whore.*

*Rita burned with resentment. And shame.*

*Which is a luxury...burning is a luxury...*

Izzy smiled at her, a succubus of promise. A soother, and a liar. She stretched farther out on the bed like a caterpillar with a hookah.

Just then, Izzy's mother Stacey poked in her in the door and said, “We're getting the coals ready.” Stacey and Jay, Izzy's stepfather, were barbecuing steaks for everyone. Rita was agog at the irony of that.

“Thanks, Mom,” Izzy told her. Izzy, who was almost forty, yet lived at home and wrote poetry. She had a trust fund from her grandmother and she would never have to work if she didn't want to.

“I...kind of hate you,” Rita blurted. She gasped and covered her mouth. “I-I'm sorry!”

“No. It's cool.” Izzy grinned at her and moved her shoulders again, as if she were working overtime to appear patient. “That's very honest. You need to be honest. Isn't that the one requirement I had for working together?”

Rita flared. *You dared to have conditions, when you had no idea how miserable I am.* But Izzy was quite correct. Rita had shyly approached her at the women's meeting, and whispered her request: “Will you be my sponsor?” It was like a little boy asking a little girl, “Will you be my Valentine?” And Izzy had told her what she would require of her in order to work with her.

She had not told Izzy that she'd picked her because she secretly thought she was better than Izzy. That was a problem; now that they had moved into honesty, how could she tell her that?

“Let's start with an easy one,” Izzy suggested. She picked up Rita's hand-written sheaf of papers. The splotched lines spoke of sins both of commission and omission, of people she had hurt by her insane behavior. “I can't,” Rita said wretchedly, and started to cry.

Izzy shuffled the pages. In her hands, they seemed like exotic, precious documents, notes from the underground, a liturgy. “Let's begin at the beginning of your drinking. You were twelve. That's when you lived in Japan. You stole a case of champagne from the officers' club.”

Rita forced a wan smile, dragging herself back into the game. What she had actually done was steal a large container of lighter fluid from the chiefs' club.

She shrugged, having no idea how to entwine the lie with the confession. “It seemed like such a big deal then.”

“How much did the champagne cost?” Izzy persisted. She smoothed back her hair. “It's hard to say. Less than a hundred dollars?”

Izzy nodded. "Then write a check for a hundred dollars to the USO."

"But..." Rita sighed. "All right."

Izzy's eyes narrowed. She stopped smiling. "Do you want to stay sober or not?"

Rita felt a *frisson*; her scalp prickled. Suddenly she remembered the overpowering delicious odor of gasoline.

"I do," Rita assured her. "I do want to...get sober."

Izzy stared at her, still unsmiling.

"All right. I'm sorry," Rita shifted in her chair. She felt awkward sitting in a chair while Izzy was lounging around, almost like being alone with a boy in his bedroom back in high school.

"Here." Izzy extended her finger and jabbed at something on the list. "This is pretty big."

Rita's stomach clenched.

*Majo.*

Rita glanced at Izzy's clock, which of course was not some standard-issue clock radio from Target, but an Art Deco fairy perched on one foot, grasping a medicine-ball-like sphere in the circle of her arms. Rita imagined Izzy spying it a thrift store and knowing it was a treasure; or inheriting it from a British aunt who had worn cabbage-rose Gypsy shawls, slightly tarnished silver earrings, and smears of patchouli oil on the insides of her wrists.

"Stick with it," Izzy told her, rustling the pages.

"But you can read it," Rita argued. Then she shook her head, a surrender; it didn't work that way in Catholic confession, either. She had been raised a Catholic. You couldn't hand the priest a list of your sins, then tap your fingers while he read them, and expect absolution. It didn't work that way; there was a power in the spoken word; and as they said in the program, she was as sick as her secrets.

Izzy blinked at her impassively.

So Rita began. "There was an old woman." *Who lived in a shoe.* "She lived in town. I mean, not on the Navy base. She lived in the Japanese part of...of Japan." Rita flicked her hand. "Of course she did. She was Japanese."

She stopped abruptly; her throat began to close up.

"It's all right, Rita," Izzy said, reaching out a hand. Her skin was warm and her fingers, soft. She wore about two dozen bangle bracelets and rings on her thumbs. "It really is. You can let it all go. You don't have to feel like this. It's a choice."

*Don't smear your polish,* Rita thought, feeling catty, aware that she was making an effort to prove to herself that she was small and mean and dislikable.

"We...we would go to Cynthia's house on the weekends," she murmured. "She lived by the beach. I loved it there." Her voice caught. "It was so much nicer than our house. Not our house, but her family...actually, her father was stationed on a ship. So it was just her mom and her sisters."

"No men," Izzy filled in, and Rita shut her eyes. "We'll get to that," Izzy said. "The part about your father, I mean. *This* is about the old lady."

"She carried sticks on her back," Rita said, her stomach fluttering. "Branches. Like a woodcutter in a fairy tale. Maybe that's why we said it."

"*Majo,*" Izzy filled in.

It hung in the air, that horrible word; between them like a curtain, a chasm, a charcoal briquette. Rita stared into the diamond. *I could will myself away. I could go now...*

*...but then I would come back, and I would still be here.*

"I still don't know why she was always carrying sticks around," she told her sponsor. "I can't imagine that she was selling them. Or that she burned them for fuel. It was so...medieval."

Rita saw her then, the squat Japanese woman with the rickety legs. Her face was moon-shaped, so round that her eyes appeared to be closed, or tightly squinted. Her hair was metallic gray, a curly frizz around her head, like an Afro.

In the warm evenings, sticky with sea salt, the five American girls would trek home from the beach. Rita and Cynthia, and Cynthia's three sisters. The moon gleaming over the Japanese-style beach houses with upturned tile roofs; the bamboo poles crosshatching a two-story structure that was being painted. Tinny music.

They ate Japanese Popsicles on the way home. They swaggered because they were Americans. Japan was still a third-world country. Americans could not drink the water. Japanese people peed in open sewers. The girls were told not to walk barefoot in the Japanese grass or they would get worms.

The afternoon shadows stretched across the sandy cobblestones, splashing against the frames of the beach houses. The effect was disorienting, as if Rita's surroundings were being flattened out, as if the world were smothering under glass from lack of oxygen.

"You feel things very deeply," her father had told her, just before he left on his ship for another nine-month tour. Like a pregnancy. "That's going to be hard on you."

And as the shadows collected into the old lady, she knew he was right.

"Look," Cynthia's youngest sister said. Her name was Catherine and she was sunburned. Her blond hair was streaked and hung over her shoulders, and she was wearing a towel wrapped around waist, revealing the top of her leopard-print bathing suit. "Here she comes."

Heads turned in the direction of the old woman, stooped and old beneath her burden as she minced down the alley toward them. Her head was tucked beneath her chin. She wore a pair of oversized loden green cotton pants that flapped around her calves and a baggy blouse made of white muslin with faded green and blue embroidery around the neck. She shuffled along in a pair of *zori*, what Americans called flip-flops or shower shoes. She was as brown as a pecan. Her right hand was clutched around a tall branch that she was using as a walking stick.

On her back a large bundle of sticks weighed her down; she looked like a hunchback. They were bound with a piece of fraying rope that was then threaded around her shoulders and across her sunken chest. Every time they saw her, she was dragging around sticks, a hermit crab who stole houses from a dead forest. Rita had begun to wonder if they were always the same ones.

Rita couldn't tell if the old lady was looking at them or not. Her face was so wrinkled that her eyelids drooped over her eyes. Her mouth was turned downward, but it was impossible to tell if she was frowning.

Rita's heart thudded and she licked her lips. *Today, she promised, this will go different.*

Catherine grabbed Rita's forearm and squeezed it.

Cynthia's next younger sister, Bonnie, took a step forward. She grinned at the woman, her young lips drawn back, eyes wide and a little blank, almost as if she were timing her attack.



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*Shush, shosh.* The woman shuffled forward. Her bow legs managed along as she used the walking stick for leverage. Now Rita was certain she was looking at them. At her.

Then Catherine cried out, "Majo!"

It was the Japanese word for witch.

"Majo!" Bonnie cried.

The woman stopped walking.

It was a timeless, evil moment; shadows slid farther down the walls, pooling blackness on the cobblestones. Sand made them gritty. Shame made them thrilling. This was her second month of weekends with Cynthia's family — her parents were pleased she had friends, something that was hard to come by in military families — and it had gone this way every time.

"Majo!" Cynthia's older sister Leslie cried. And "majo!" That was Cynthia herself.

The woman didn't move, didn't blink. Rita's face burned as she tried to look anywhere but at the old lady. The folds of skin betrayed no emotion; the woman stared at her, and Rita gazed unwillingly back.

The other girls shrieked, "Majo!" They were thrilled, socking each other on the shoulder, hysterical with the rudeness of it. Military kids were trained to be polite to the Japanese. World War II had not been so long ago, and even the *kamikaze* suicide pilots had been careful to say "Please cram me into my Zero so that I may immolate myself against a US Navy destroyer, thank you very much." Cynthia and her sisters had gone AWOL.

Then a cat's head appeared from behind the woman's legs. Its face was sooty black and its ears were very large, almost like a fox's. It stayed close, its gaze fixed on the girls.

"Nekko!" Bonnie cooed. Japanese for cat.

The cat made no response. The old lady and the woman stood immobilized, like life-size cardboard cutouts.

"Here, *nekko*," Catherine urged, bending down and making kissing sounds.

"Catherine," Rita reproved, but she spoke so softly no one heard her. She wasn't even sure she had spoken aloud.

The woman seemed to reactivate then, and the cat too. She turned to the right and shambled so close to the building exterior that Rita could almost hear the sandpapery scritch of the ends of the branches against the wooden structure. The cat trotted behind her.

The girls watched in silence. Then Cynthia took a deep breath and yelled at the retreating figure.

"Majo! Majo! Majo!"

Shame.

I want to live forever, light up the sky like a —

"We did it every weekend, all summer," Rita told Izzy. The tears were streaming down her face.

Izzy said nothing.

Rita cried harder. She was agonized, abasing herself before this woman; yet even in her distress, she understood that Izzy could not know what this was like for her. Izzy had been a hooker and a heroin addict. She was probably laughing at Rita's uptight brand of misery. A friend of Rita's had told her that her own sponsor had yawned during her confession and drawled, "That all you got?"

"How could we do that?" Rita demanded.

Izzy remained silent.

Rita looked hard at her. Izzy blinked once, looking back. Then she said to her, "You fucking liar."

"What?" Rita jerked back her head as if Izzy had physically attacked her.

The other woman dropped the pages, spread her fingers, and raised her hands in front of herself like a surgeon who just had scrubbed up. Then she scooted on her bottom toward the end of the bed, perpendicular with Rita's chair. She rose gracefully, her scented oils wafting, candles flickering, and said, "If you're going to hold something back, what's the point?"

She raised her chin and her eyes were cinder black. "Well? Go on back to your sick life."

Rita's stomach burned. *She knows. She knows. She knows.*

Rita blindly reached for the papers and began to gather them up. Her heart was constricting inside her body; she was quaking. Her hands shook as if she had a terrible disease.

Which she did.

Her pages against her chest, she made for the door.

Izzy sailed ahead of her, turning, and faced her as she blocked her. Her expression of smug contempt disappeared.

"It's all right," she soothed, laying a hand on Rita's shoulder. She looked kind again. Eager to help. "I was just making sure."

Rita gaped at her. Then Izzy's face began to smoke. The first layer of skin took on that frightening, tight sheen.

Rita was afraid she was going to vomit.

But Izzy's face was not smoking, of course. And here was something they forgot to show in films: that before you burned, you sweated a lot. Izzy was not sweating. Rita wondered if Izzy had ever sweated in her entire life. She doubted it.

"Rita, I didn't want you to hold anything back, is all," Izzy said, massaging her shoulder. Her hand was icy through Rita's navy blue sweater. "You seem so unhappy —"

Shame flared fresh in Rita's gut, so hot and burning and like a comet's tail. She tried to hold herself together by thinking of the temple dogs her father had collected in Japan. They held small carved balls in their mouths; it was a *koan*: *The ball is too hot to swallow and too big to spit out. What do you do with it?*

"So you decided a little shock treatment was in order?" Rita asked finally, pulling back the handle of the door and yanking it open. "You go to hell!"

Izzy was not smiling, was not smug; actually, she looked very young and frightened. "I've been there, Rita. And so have you."

"Don't talk to me. Don't ever speak to me again." Tears welled. If they ran down her cheeks, they would become steam. Of course she was holding back. She was holding back because there really was no twelve-step program for burning old women and their cats to death in the middle of a Japanese beach resort.

*I want to burn forever, light up the sky like a —*

At home — her home now — she had a copy of *The Far Pavilions*. She had *The Devils*. She had every version of *Joan of Arc* ever filmed, including *The Messenger*. And *Elizabeth*.

She watched them for the immolation scenes. She watched people burning alive.

Over and over, the way men watch pornography, she watched skin singe and melt, heard screams.

She began to sob, and Izzy put her arms around her and said, "Yes, there. Yes, that's right." Tears, the metaphor. Water, water, everywhere... Of course she wasn't an alcoholic. What a stupid thing to be.

*If only I was just a murderess.*

Here it is, that incandescent moment:

*When the old woman had gone up. What a lifechanger.*

Rita would not have laughed for the world, not the whole world, but there was something hilarious about it. The smell and the screams; she had doubled over with laughter. She had shrieked with it.

On the beach, in the dark; she had lured the cat with a can of tuna fish. The woman had shuffled after it in those shower shoes, those stupid shoes, shoveling sand to the left, right, and that had infuriated Rita. She still wasn't sure why.

I can't tell anyone.

Then they were there on the beach, both of them, alone together, with the cat.

"It's going to be all right," Izzy assured her. "Just let it out. There's a hole in your heart, isn't there. That you have been trying to fill with alcohol. And it didn't work. But now, we can fill it with joy."

You are so stupid, so blind, I could burn your house down tonight.

The luxury is shame; to have done that and be allowed to feel ashamed?

The koan again: the ball is too big to spit out, too hot to swallow.

It's men, she thought. The fault of men. Men had done such things to women; for a thousand years in China, up to the early 1900's, they bound the feet of three-year-old girls to make them small enough to stick into the assholes of their husbands during sex. Lumps of flesh rotted away, and the little girls were forced to walk to break the bones in their toes and insteps, smearing unsightly trails of blood and pus on the hummingbird floors of their ancestral homes.

And the burning times, when all Europe reeked of...

...barbecue...

If a Bedouin girl did not bleed on her marriage night, her male relatives had the right and responsibility to shoot her in the head. In Africa, they still sliced off the clitorises and labia of virgin brides so they wouldn't feel sexual pleasure, and some died from the shock.

In India, widows were burned alive on the pyres of their husbands, both to show devotion and to solve the problem of feeding them, as recently as 2002.

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But I did that to her. I did it. A girl burned an old woman.

But he did that to me.

He did that to me.

"Keep crying. It will help," Izzy promised.

I think the witch knew, all along. I think she wanted me to kill her, better me than some man. It was the cat she hasn't forgiven me for, and that is why I burn inside. I burn inside. I burn inside. She is cursing me from her grave, and I burn inside.

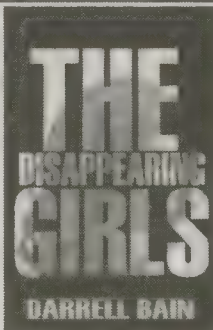
Izzy's mother Stacey opened the door. She was closer in age to Rita than Rita to Izzy, and she looked like the Bohemian aunt who would have given Izzy the clock. Her hair was a pre-Raphaelite tangle of ringlets, her features worn but still lush. She had marched for abortion rights, for farmworkers' rights, to stop nuclear proliferation. Until she married. Her husband was a therapist, and Rita felt awkward talking to Izzy in his home.

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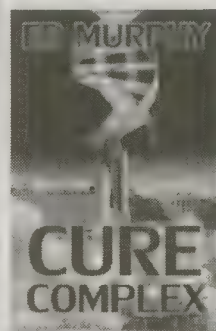
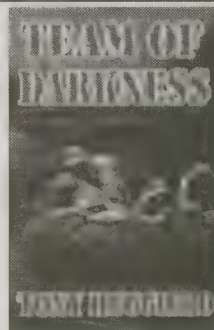
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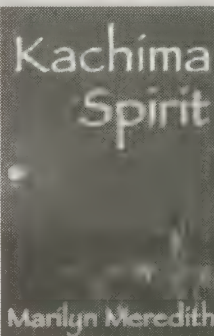
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**Kachima Spirit by Marilyn Meredith**

ISBN: 0-7599-0099-X

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As if she were dealing with an amateur, when anyone with a degree in psychology could see right through her.

Izzy's mother asked softly, "Is everything all right?"

The scent of cooking meat wafted with her into the room. There is nothing bad about the smell of a burning human being except the hair.

Rita sensed Izzy nodding her head to reassure Stacey that things were progressing smoothly.

The door closed again.

Rita kept crying. After a long time, she got tired; she lifted her head though it weighed as much as a cord of wood and said to Izzy, "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I'm sorry, too." Izzy's incense was musky and thick. Her body was soft and kind. "I shouldn't have pushed you like that. You're ready when you're ready."

"No, it's okay. I just..."

*He did that to me.*

*I can't say anything.*

"It had nothing to do with what happened," she blurted, then realized she had spoken aloud. She wiped her eyes and shook her head.

"The shame is what makes us sick," Izzy replied.

And that was when it all came together; like spontaneous combustion; reading the book and talking to Izzy and all the endless journaling. There was a way to get past it; to have a life again; to stop the endless writhing.

"You really do get it," Rita said, staring at her sponsor with her sloe eyes and her heavy makeup. The young old woman; her *idiot savant*.

"Shame is like acid," Izzy said.

Rita held her breath trying to steady herself, then let it out in one huge exhalation, like the breath of a dragon. "Oh, my God, Izzy, I have held back," she whispered hoarsely, "and I..." She trembled. "I..."

Izzy didn't hear her. "It burns a hole in your heart. And then you try to fill it up." She sounded like a fundamentalist preacher.

Rita thought of the old movie of Helen Keller's life called *THE MIRACLE WORKER*. When her teacher, Annie Sullivan, puts her hand under the water pump and Helen finally makes the connection between the finger spelling and the thing itself: symbol and reality: water.

*The metaphor again!*

"Fill it up," Rita said slowly.

"With alcohol, drugs, sex," Izzy said happily, embracing her pupil. "Whatever it takes."

*Then what hole are men filling? Our hole? Our holes that can never be filled? And so they rage, and mutilate, and assassinate.*

She felt herself dodging again. No man had forced her to burn that woman.

*He did that to—*

The door opened again. Mom Stacey smiled uncertainly at the two of them and said, "Dinner's just about ready."

Izzy hesitated. Rita said, "We can stop here for now. Really," she assured Izzy, who didn't look convinced. "It's a good place to stop."

"Okay." Izzy looked at her mother. "You got one really charred for me?"

"As a cinder," Stacey replied, chuckling, earrings shining. She said to Rita, "Me, I like it to be practically moving. Yours is still on the grill. How do you like it?"

Rita composed herself and said, "Oh. Medium-rare, I guess." She was grateful to the depths of her life for the interruption. She had almost betrayed herself.

*I will eat their food, and then I will leave. I will never see Izzy again. I will never go to those meetings again No one knows how crazy I am. I have hidden it too well. I function too easily.*

"You're sure you're good to take a break?" Izzy asked; and Rita had one pause, when hope flared and she thought maybe, just maybe, she could really tell Izzy her story. And maybe, just maybe, she would stop burning inside.

But here is the answer to the koan: *The ball is too big to spit out, but too hot to swallow.*

*So you accept it.*

Accept it.

Yet something in her raged. Something in her wanted to go away, to Copenhagen and the water.

She went into the bathroom to splash water on her face. On the tank of the toilet, a small votive gleamed; it was just the sort of touch she herself would employ when she was entertaining.

She dried her hands and looked in the mirror. She looked terrible.

Izzy and Stacy met her outside the bathroom. The three women filed outside into the smoky back yard. Jay the therapist turned from the barbecue. He wore the uniform of a rich liberal at home: beautiful chambray shirt, nicely worn jeans, socks and Birkenstocks. He was tall with ashy hair; his eyes were washed-out blue and his smile was kind. Smoke rose toward his face and he waved it away like a gnat. His eyes watered.

When a person burned to death, they sweated, and their eyes watered.

He said to Rita, "I hope you're hungry."

So he was going to pretend not to notice her swollen eyes. He would ignore her pain so as not to make her uncomfortable.

Rita smiled at him. "I am," she said. Her eyes ticked toward the charcoal briquettes beneath the grill, orange and evenly crusted with heat. She had to restrain herself from rushing forward and grabbing them up, and smashing them against his face.

She had been so upset about the *majo* and the *nekko* that she had set Cynthia's house on fire. The sisters had all died.

That was what happened to witches.

Jay picked up a baster, squeezed the bulb, and lowered the tip into a bowl of dark brown liquid. He released the bulb and the liquid shot into the tube. He squirted into onto several pieces of steak laid across the barbecue grate, and she *was* embarrassed. He was ejaculating. Metaphorically.

"My own recipe," he said, and she had to stifle hysterical laughter. He saw her amusement and his lips turned up in a quizzical way.

She stared at his mouth, at the briquettes, at the two women. She smelled the cooking meat.

She thought about turning on her heel and leaving. She didn't want to be too close to this man who had studied the inner workings of the human psyche. Her entire life had consisted of covering her tracks. Of showing up after the burnings in the fishing village—the house, the Americans, no one had missed the old lady, it appeared, or the cat—and searching for the dead. Then college, and marrying; and making her marriage a good one, although almost every night since her honeymoon she had dreamed of soaking her bed in gasoline and lighting just one, delicate match.

The cold sea beckoned, with its freezing respite...

...and so, of course, just in case, she had never gone to a therapist. In fact, she had worked hard at assuring everyone she was completely well-adjusted, and maintaining a pleasant and serene exterior, so there had never been an observable need to see a therapist. One of her friends had recently commented that Rita was the healthiest woman she had ever met.

And now, she was going to sit to the right of her AA sponsor and across from her sponsor's father, who had a Ph.D. in mental illness.

She began to sweat.

She thought about going upstairs and taking a cold shower, which was ridiculous, and only a sign of her heightened anxiety. She reminded herself that during her career as a suburbanite, she had socialized dozens of times, if not hundreds, with therapists — psychologists, psychiatrists — and she had always passed. She was a creature of functionality. She was someone who could move through the entire curtain of flame and not flinch. She had already been burned alive, and come through smiling.

So she smiled and nodded as everyone carried food to the table; and closed her eyes as she savored the first bite and declared the cooked meat "heavenly." The parents of her sponsor had a lot in common with her — books read, musical preferences. They left Izzy in the dust with their sophistication. Rita was savagely pleased.

She took another bite. And another.

Their faces smoked, but she ignored them.

Then she noticed Jay watching her. Covertly, perhaps, but the scrutiny was there.

She put down her fork and clasped her hands in her lap, where he couldn't see them.

"Are you all right?" Izzy asked, such a bull in a china shop. Rita felt a bittersweet affection for her lack of finesse, despite the fact that her sponsor was aiming the searchlights firmly in her direction. All right? She had been sobbing on Izzy's shoulder not less than fifteen minutes ago.

"I'm fine." Rita picked up her knife and fork and cut herself another piece of meat.

"About books. I read the most interesting book about the resurgence of the Right," Stacey said, shifting the attention back off her guest. "It's about the elasticity of boundaries, how the group consciousness begins to tip toward boundaries if there's too much freedom."

Jay looked at his wife. "It's not about freedom. It's about shame."

And at that moment, that very instant, the old woman appeared in the room. She stood behind Jay's chair, as if she were growing out of his head. The same Brillo-pad hair, the same squinting eyes. The medieval peasant clothes, before they had caught fire.

Soundlessly, Rita laid her silverware back down.

"I don't follow," Stacey said to Jay. "Are you saying people do things they're ashamed of, so they want boundaries..."

He cocked his head at her. "Shame: 'a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety in one's behavior...'"

The old woman locked gazes with Rita. Or so Rita assumed; it was impossible to tell if she was looking at her, as it had always been, all those times they yelled at her: *majo, majo*.

He said, "Some individuals tend to perceive an untenable situation as being one of their own creation. That if he or she had been stronger, or cleverer, or more moral, they would not be in the situation in which they find themselves. That, in essence, it's

their fault. A man, for example, might feel shame that his wife and children are dying of starvation during a famine. There's nothing he can do, but he still frames the tragedy in terms of his own shortcomings."

The woman stared. She did stare. Her eyes were dark brown. There was a look on her face, a look...

Then she went up in flames.

"You look...you don't look okay," Izzy persisted.

"Excuse me," Rita said, rising and pushing back her chair.

She turned her back on the silently writhing torch and walked quickly toward the bathroom. Another chair scraped back and Jay said, "Iz, let her go. You guys have been doing recovery work, right? Give her some space."

Rita went into the bathroom and shut the door. She leaned against it and closed her eyes. She began to sob. She cried so hard she doubled over.

Her body dribbled to the floor as if it were made of water.

*Oh, my God.*

It had been *shame* she had seen on the face of the old woman's face as she had gone up; intense *shame*, that she was lacking in her own ability to save herself.

Rita crawled to the toilet and pushed up the lid. The flame of the little votive flickered

She vomited up all the meat.

It had been shame, that last moment, that they had shared. It was not a luxury problem.

In another, happier land, Rita might have sought forgiveness. But she lived in Copenhagen Harbor...

...the water came to lap at her toes, and at her ankles, and at her knees, and the place between her legs that he had ruined...his fault, all of it...*he made me do it...*

She took a deep breath, her last, waiting for the water to fill her.

Despite the roar and crackle, she heard them pounding on the door, heard Jay shouting, "It's smoke!"

Her Izzy crying her name, "Rita! Holy fucking shit! Open the door!"

Heard her own voice shrieking "*Majo! Majo!*"

She was there, in the harbor, the mermaid, undulating between the ice floes of Copenhagen Harbor; the pewter knot bracelet sank to the ocean bottom as she transformed into a spirit of the air — escape of the death sentence as if by magic.

As if by witchcraft.

*Hide, witch, hide, the good folk come to burn thee...*

*It is what happens to us witches; I've seen it a thousand times, a hundred thousand, it is what happens... What a relief to realize that shame is for everyone; it is no respecter of desperation or fury or agony.*

*Wallow or engulf, which is worse? To go up in flames inside or outside? The inner, chosen? The outer, inflicted?*

*Hide, witch, hide: the good folk come to burn thee...*

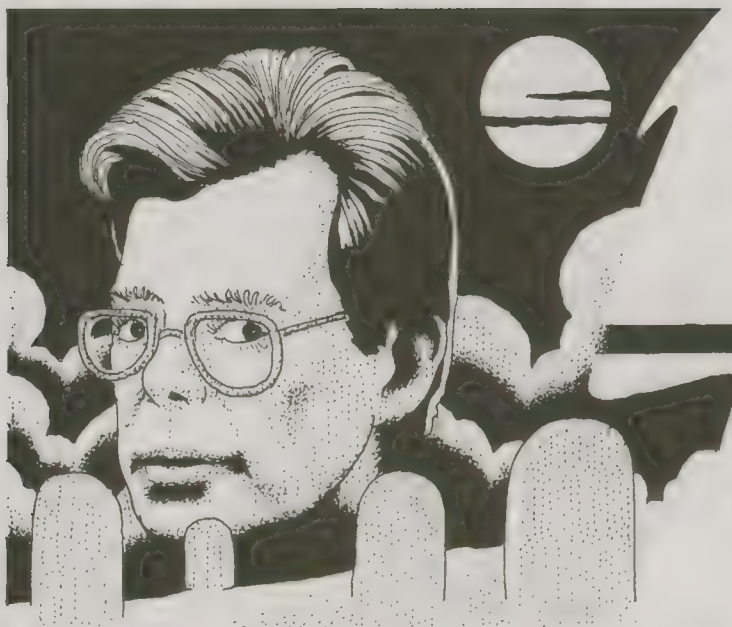
*The only part that smells is the hair.*

The door burst open and brought with it...more oxygen. Did she scream at the last, that old *majo*? Did she scream like this one?

*Better to burn in hell than to leave no trace.*

Rita felt her eyes pop, and then she swam away.





# BEV VINCENT

## FROM THE DEAD ZONE

### STEPHEN KING NEWS

WELCOME BACK to the Dead Zone, fellow readers. This is the first column I'm writing in 2004 so I'll take the opportunity to give you an overview of the upcoming year. Get your day planners ready—there's a lot happening!

As of this writing, *Wolves of the Calla* is still holding onto a place on some bestseller lists after eleven weeks in release. Reviewer Dorman T. Shindler gave the *Dark Tower* series nice coverage in an interview article in the November/December issue of *Pages* magazine and *Salon* columnist Andrew O'Hehir reviewed *Wolves* for the *New York Times* in early January, providing a brief history of the series. "Will [their quest] point them toward a man who sits in a room in Maine, in a world very much like our own, writing about them while a medal from the National Book Foundation glows mysteriously on his desk?" he writes. "We can only hope so."

This is the year when readers finally get to find out who—if anyone—makes it to the Tower and what he/she/they/it find if they arrive. In early February, King surprised *Dark Tower* fans by moving the release schedule of the final two books forward to June and September from the originally announced dates of August and November. Before they appear, though, we have numerous other King-inspired treats in store.

*Kingdom Hospital* debuts on ABC on March 3<sup>rd</sup> with a two-hour episode. Eleven weekly one-hour episodes follow leading up to the two-hour conclusion in

late May. The \$37.5 million limited series should already be in full swing by the time you read this. It's been receiving a lot of great advanced publicity, though the *Washington Post* called it "I Was Hit by a Van and Turned It Into a 13-Hour Miniseries."

ABC is relying heavily on the series to pump up their drama slate. Their Entertainment president, Susan Lyne, said, "We really feel this is the best thing he's ever done for us." She also said that King, who has been watching footage every day while recovering from last fall's battle with pneumonia, considers the series the best television adaptation of his work. "It's got more humor than I think you've seen in a Stephen King show in a long time, great characters and a really terrific, building narrative arc with a huge, surprising ending."

ABC planned to air two shows before the series premieres, a behind-the-scenes "making of" and a mockumentary akin to the one they did for *Rose Red*, interviewing Eleanor Druse as if she were a real person.

The network isn't averse to bringing the series back for a second or third season if it's a success, though they hedged their bets by saying, "There is a lot to be said for a series that plays out in straight weeks." Andrew McCarthy, who plays Hook, said, "At the end of the whole series, there's a little window left open where evil is still lurking, so they can go and open up a whole other story line."

In earlier interviews, King hinted that he would pass the writing reins on to someone else if *Kingdom Hospital* is renewed. However, in January, *Entertainment Weekly* quoted him as saying he could have the next thirteen episodes written by June if it's picked up.

Lyne said, "We think this is going to be real event television." Market-speak for, "We're hoping a ton of people tune in."

King says, "We are going to scare them silly."



Ed Begley Jr., who plays Dr. Jesse James, is well known for his previous stint as Dr. Ehrlich in *St. Elsewhere*. Begley says working on *Kingdom Hospital* is a lot like his earlier experience without all the distractions. "You don't have Howie Mandel putting a glove over his head or Denzel Washington becoming a matinee idol. Between those two things, I could barely remember my lines."

Jack Coleman plays Peter Rickman, a graphic artist who undergoes a graphic experience in the opening moments of the series that is strongly based on King's 1999 accident. Coleman said, "People who certainly know anything about what happened to Stephen King are going to go, 'Oh my God, that's what happened to [him].' But from there on [the series] is fiction. It's no longer Stephen King's story." The actor said that

watching the scene was a cathartic experience for King. "He found it very harrowing, but also very rewarding."

Ironically, Coleman filmed the accident scene last November, on the night King was in New York accepting his National Book Foundation lifetime achievement award, just before he was hospitalized for nearly a month. According to *Entertainment Weekly*, Coleman's mother, Mary, died early in production, emotionally loading scenes concerning a ghostly presence named Mary.

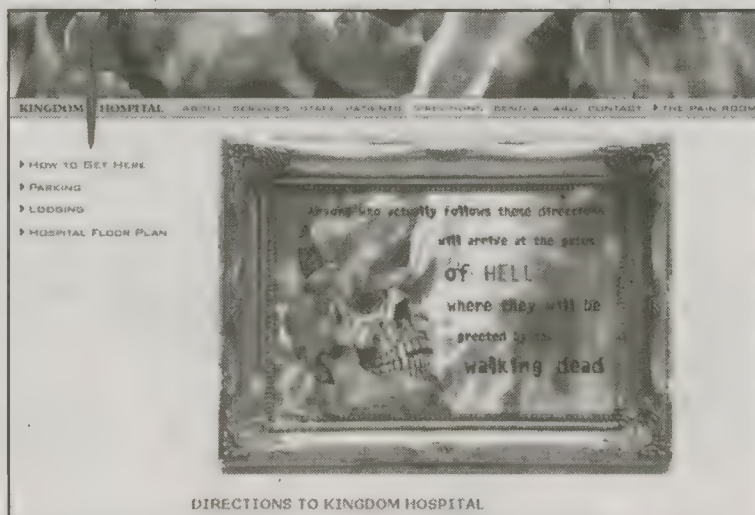
"This is Stephen's most intensely autobiographical expression of what happened to him," said producer Mark Carliner. "You will see exactly what happened to Steve that afternoon when he was walking down the road out near his lake house in Maine. He wanted it to be the most terrifying thing that had ever been filmed, and I think you will find it pretty shocking...Can you imagine what someone like Stephen King sees while hovering between life and death? He was so moved and driven by what he had experienced in the hospital...It just came from his gut."

ABC's Lyne, said, "Stephen once told me that his wife asked him: 'When are you going to stop writing about this stuff?' He said, 'When it's out. When it's all out.'"



A tie-in book, *The Journals of Eleanor Druse: My Investigation of the Kingdom Hospital Incident*, came out the first week of January. It's similar in format to *The Diary of Ellen Rimbauer*, a hardcover without a dust jacket. The word Fiction appears in very tiny print on the back cover, otherwise the book could easily be mistaken for non-fiction. The usual disclaimer about fictional characters doesn't appear on the copyright page.

Publisher Hyperion has high hopes for the book, with a first printing of 500,000 copies, only slightly less than the printing for *Wolves of the Calla* and double the run for *The Diary of Ellen Rimbauer*. Since the series unfolds over thirteen weeks—compared with three



nights—the book should have a longer shelf life, hence the larger printing.

One of the book's coolest features is the glow-in-the-dark front cover text, a very efficient phosphorescence, the brightness of which may take you by surprise. Leave the book in direct light for a day and then turn out all the lights in the room. It's an eerie effect.

The putative author, Eleanor Druse, Sally to her friends, is an aging spiritualist with a predilection for hypochondria. A volunteer at Kingdom Hospital, she's also a frequent resident of the hospital, well known to patients and staff alike. Chris from SKEMERs notes that "druse" is the word for the inside of a rock where crystals are formed—like a geode—which is apropos. She often uses crystals to channel her concentration.

The book opens with a letter written by Druse—who occasionally refers to herself as a "bag of bones"—to Stephen King, asking him to read her journals and possibly help her research the strange goings-on at Kingdom Hospital. The journals relate her experiences starting about a year before the miniseries begins.

Dr. Stegman is still working at Boston General, adding the minds of people unlucky enough to fall under his blade. Druse is sent there for observation and testing when she collapses and hits her head on the floor after witnessing her friend Maddy Krüger's horrific death at Kingdom Hospital. Dr. Metzger, a psychiatrist, and Stegman are concerned that she is suffering from seizures—if Metzger's pharmacological treatments don't work, Stegman wants to go in with the knife.

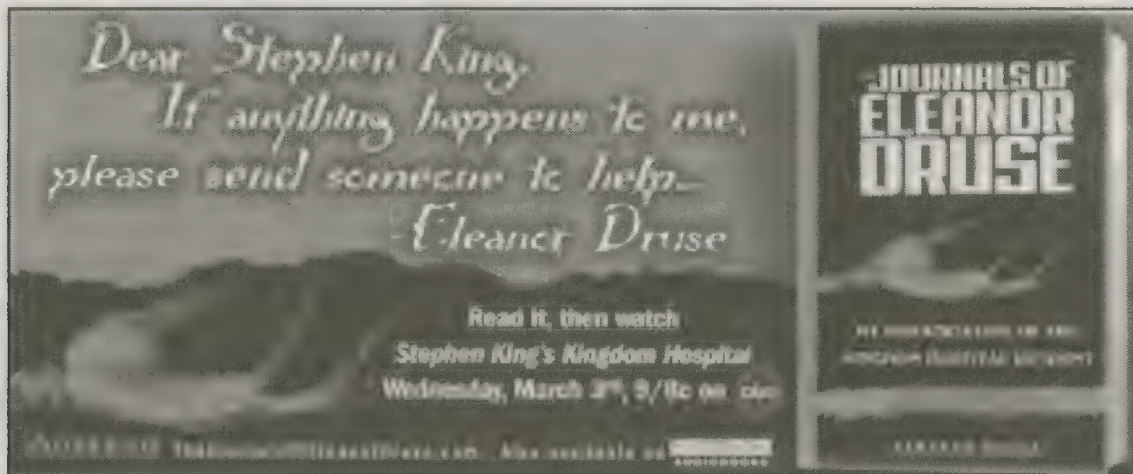
Druse and Maddy were hospitalized together with whooping cough at the

old Kingdom Hospital in 1939 just before it burned. Druse remembers little of that time—it seems more like a story she's been told than something she experienced—but important things happened back then that have a direct bearing on the eerie presences she now detects at the hospital. Maddy's suicide note indicates that Druse has repressed memories of something horrible, perhaps related to the mysterious brain lesion that shows up on her brain scan at Boston General.

Druse enlists the help of her unambitious son Bobby, an orderly at Kingdom Hospital, to scour old records for any hint of what might have happened in 1939. Meanwhile, Druse detects the tormented spirit of a young girl apparently haunting one of the hospital's elevator shafts and has frequent sightings of a more sinister apparition who she comes to think of as Dr. Rat, a man who is truly a ghost from her past.

*Journals* comes to an end just as Druse is on the verge of a breakthrough, having found a way to communicate with the young girl's spirit. The story overlaps some events in the series, including the arrival of Dr. Stegman to Kingdom Hospital and Druse's efforts to be checked in under false pretenses so she can continue her investigation. It also provides a great deal of backstory that may not be available from the miniseries itself.

The book makes a few Dark Tower references (ambulance No. 19, Nozz-a-la-soda) and some nods to classic horror (the pest control company is named LuvKraft) and some to just plain classics. The names of the medications prescribed to Druse: Scyllazine and Charybdisol are derived from Scylla and Charybdis, two challenges facing Odysseus on his way back to Utica from Troy. He had to choose between one—a terrifying whirlpool where there was a chance he'd lose his entire ship and crew—and the other, a terrible beast that was guaranteed to kill six of his crew if he went that route. Odysseus chose to sacrifice a few rather than risk the lives of everyone. It's an interesting metaphor for Druse's choice to stop taking her medication, risking her



health and her life to continue her investigation into events at the hospital.



Hyperion put a lot of work into a tie-in website for the *Journals* and the miniseries. At first glance, it looks like a real page for a regional hospital in Eastern Maine. However, the truth reveals itself to people who hit the refresh buttons on their browsers. Innocuous pages change, now containing warnings or pleas for help. The hospital's motto changes from "The hospital that brings out the best in you" to "The hospital that will kill you. Believe us!!"

The page offering directions to the hospital occasionally appears with a warning that says, "Anyone who actually follows these directions will arrive at the gates of Hell, where they will be greeted by the walking dead."

Among the staff is a nurse named Bannerman (related to Castle Rock's sheriff?), Dr. Jeremiah Duhling, whose last name is suspiciously similar to Dooling, author of four of the series episodes (see below) and Nurse Carrie von Trier, perhaps a distant relative of *Riget*'s creator.

Occasionally, the comprehensive list of services provided by the hospital appears crossed out in swaths of blood, with the word MURDER scrawled to one side. Druse also attempts to communicate with browsers through sporadic appearances of a message. "I am Eleanor Druse, a mere patient at this hospital, yet I know things that you would never think by looking at their rosey little Web site. Would you imagine that there are spirits trapped here with nowhere to go or earthquakes at the hospital site or

patients undergoing brain surgery who don't need it?"

There's also a link to an audio excerpt of the *Journals*. Localized earthquakes cause your browser to tremor every now and then. Like many web sites, the Kingdom Hospital page allows you to send greeting cards to friends, innocent, cheery little messages that are corrupted in transmission. If you sign up for updates, you will receive the following notice:

"Thank you for your interest in Kingdom Hospital. We apologize for the impersonal auto response. However, we have been deluged with e-mails from people who are inquiring about rumors of earthquakes, malpractice and even paranormal activity at the hospital. These have been and remain rumors. We have also received claims that our Web site features messages about earthquake activity at the hospital, messages from angry patients or even ghosts. There is no such thing. We have done exhaustive tests on the site and find it to be in perfect working order. It only reflects the type of professional high standard of medical care that we offer here at Kingdom Hospital."

The Pain Room section was scheduled to go online on January 31<sup>st</sup>. Check it out at:

- [www.kingdomhospitalofmaine.com](http://www.kingdomhospitalofmaine.com)
- [www.TheJournalsOfEleanorDruse.com](http://www.TheJournalsOfEleanorDruse.com)

ABC also has a couple of websites devoted to the series. Visit my message board for links.



SECRET WINDOW (aka SECRET GARDEN and SECRET WINDOW, SECRET GARDEN) was supposed to premiere in late April, but

the movie's first advanced screening went so well that Sony decided to move its debut ahead by six weeks to March 12<sup>th</sup>. The trailer debuted on *Entertainment Weekly* during the first week of January and the film got a prime commercial spot during the Super Bowl. The trailer also ran before Tim Burton's *BIG FISH*, with scant mention of King's name.

The nearly simultaneous debut of this movie with *Kingdom Hospital* is an interesting piece of synchronicity. Sony Pictures owned the rights to von Trier's miniseries and, as part of the deal to attain these rights, King exchanged *Secret Window*, *Secret Garden*.

This is Depp's first picture since *PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN*. Sony thinks the buzz surrounding his Golden Globe- and Oscar-nominated performance will carry over to this film. Depp's hairstyle is interesting in *SECRET WINDOWS*, but I've been assured that it's all the rage out in Hollywood. The distributor was shooting for a PG-13 rating but that hadn't been decided yet as of this writing. Look for an interview with scriptwriter David Koepp in *Fangoria* #231 (March).



Shortly after *SECRET WINDOW*'s premiere, season two of *The Dead Zone* was released on DVD. The five-disc box set came out on March 16<sup>th</sup> and has production commentary for all nineteen episodes and a complete making-of-an-episode feature that discusses writing, casting, directing, editing, sound mixing, and computer visual effects. Interviews feature producers Lloyd Segan, Michael and Shawn Piller, cast members Anthony Michael Hall, John L. Adams and Chris Bruno, director Michael Robison and two casting directors as well as guest



stars Louis Gosset Jr., Robert Culp, Eric Schaeffer, Ally Sheedy, Tracey Gold, Scott William Winters, Reiko Aylesworth, Ione Skye and Frank Whaley. Deleted scenes and storyboards round out the extra material.



The smell of theatre popcorn grease will still be on your clothes when *Salem's Lot* shows up on TNT in June. This one's getting good advanced publicity, too, including a "What's New" two-page spread in *TV Guide* in January and a rave preview in *Fangoria*.

*TV Guide* commented that this adaptation features a hero with much better hair than David Soul, i.e. Rob Lowe, who did a media junket, part of the Television Critics Association winter press tour, to promote the miniseries. Lowe often found himself wrestling with journalists to stay on message. Interviewers tried to derail him with questions about his departure from *West Wing* and ill-fated follow-up series *Lyon's Den*.

The four-hour series has a budget between \$12 and \$25 million, depending on who you listen to. Producer Mark Wolper said the new version has over 500 visual effects. "The sense of horror and terror that we can portray now [on television] is so much stronger than it was then" (twenty-five years ago, when the first adaptation aired). However, "the horror of this is not so much about the monster of a vampire, but more about the monster that can potentially live inside all of us."

Lowe echoes these sentiments. "You couldn't deal with the horror and its intensity in 1979. You couldn't push the envelope in terms of special effects. When you go back and look, it's a guy in a mask walking around like [a zombie]."

Lowe, who played Nick Andros in *The Stand*, is a big fan of King, calling *The Shining*, *The Stand* and *Salem's Lot* "the holy trinity" of horror. "When he's adapted well...and this script is a really great adaptation...and when filmmakers spend time on the characters and don't rush right into the horror, I think he's one of the greatest people on the screen." Lowe said that the original miniseries was the very first thing he taped on his Betamax VCR. And if you're too young to know what Betamax is, well...

*Fangoria* says, "...this *Salem's Lot* takes its time before diving into the horror. The town and its residents are

presented in naturalistic detail, and the half-dozen main characters are played with an easy, low-key subtlety by a terrific cast."

"Fans of King's more visceral shock horrors will delight at [Barlow's] assault on Mark Petrie's parents and his mortifying attack on the weak-willed Father Callahan...The movie also includes the memorable EC Comics-esque bit where the mean school bus driver gets his grisly comeuppance from the reformed student body," *Fangoria* continues. "It pushes the envelope for TV horror."

Lowe—who *Fangoria* claims looks an awful lot like King himself—claims that staking vampires isn't as easy as it looked. After he returned from location filming in Australia, he complained of

and *The Dead Zone* returns to USA for a thirteen-episode third season. Anthony Michael Hall will be stepping behind the camera to direct, produce and star in the first episode shot for the new season, "The Cold Hard Truth," which will actually be the fourth episode to air. Comic actor Richard Lewis guest stars as a shock-jock radio host who raises the issue of who the real father of J.J. Bannerman is on his program.

Actress Kendal Cross, who played Dana Bright in the original, unaired pilot, returns to the series in an episode called "No Questions Asked." Apparently she was deemed too "girl next door" for the Bright character.

*RIDING THE BULLET* will be released just in time for Halloween, appropriate since

### Important dates for 2004

- June 8: *Song of Susannah* from Grant, Scribner
- June: *Wolves of the Calla* released in trade paperback
- June: *Kingdom Hospital* released on DVD and video
- June: *Salem's Lot* debuts on TNT
- June/July: *The Dead Zone*, season 3, on USA
- September 21: *The Dark Tower*, *The Road to the Dark Tower*, *The Dark Tower Concordance*, Volume 2
- October: *RIDING THE BULLET* debuts in theaters
- October/November: *From the Borderlands* released in paperback

a sore wrist from driving stakes into sandbags. Vampire elbow, he called the affliction.

The first review, which showed up at *Ain't It Cool News*, was glowing. Renfield's Ghost (a pen name, perhaps?) said the film was as faithful to King's novel as we could possibly expect, with some surprising changes. The movie opens with Ben tracking Father Callahan down to a homeless shelter in some urban setting (Detroit, perhaps?), where they have a violent confrontation that sends them both to the hospital. (Did he say "faithful"?) R.G. says the ending is unhappy and leaves open the possibility of a sequel or an ongoing TV series. (Okay, no more parenthetical comments.)

So, that takes us into June, when *Song of Susannah*, one of the shorter installments in the Dark Tower series, appears in hardcover. At about 432 pages, it's similar in length to *The Drawing of the Three*. The same month, *Wolves of the Calla* comes out in trade paperback

the movie, which director Mick Garris described to me as "an unusual film," takes place on Halloween night. Principle photography finished in December in Vancouver and Garris had spent three days in the editing room when I last heard from him in mid-January. I'll have an interview with Garris about the movie in the next issue of *CD*.

Co-star Erika Christensen called it a "really tricky and interesting film...In my mind it's about appreciating life and being open to loving people and, of course, there's a lot of really weird stuff that happens in between. It doesn't get really gory, but it gets really freaky." She describes her character's boyfriend, played by Jonathan Jackson, as "really closed and dark." Really.

Last issue, I mentioned that George Romero was going to do a cameo appearance in *RIDING THE BULLET* in King's stead. A last-minute schedule change messed this up, so Matt Frewer, aka Max Headroom and Trashcan Man, stepped in to

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play the art teacher, "really making the part all his own, as he is wont to do," according to Garris.



In addition to the publication of *The Dark Tower* on King's birthday, September will probably also see the release of the second volume of Robin Furth's *Concordance* and my book, *The Road to the Dark Tower*, although those dates weren't confirmed before my deadline. I am currently planning to attend the World Fantasy Convention in Tempe, Arizona (October 28-31) and should have some copies of my book on hand (maybe some other goodies, who knows?) so if you're in the neighborhood, drop by and say hi.

*Borderlands 5*, which contains King's story "Stationary Bike," as well as stories by John Farris, Bentley Little, Whitley Strieber, Brian Freeman and others, including your humble servant, will be issued in mass market paperback from Warner Books this fall. It will be renamed *From the Borderlands* and has a publication date of November, though it could appear as early as September. Amazon is already taking orders. The cover art is quite attractive and is vaguely

reminiscent of *Dreamcatcher* crossed with *Misery*.

The pop-up adaptation of *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* may also appear from Scribner this fall. This year may also see the publication of King's novella "The Things They Left Behind" in a crime fiction anthology edited by Ed McBain, though Tor's publication date and the book's title have not yet been announced. *THE TALISMAN* is set to start shooting this summer, based on a script by Ehren Kruger (*THE RING*). *DESPERATION*, a three-hour movie to be directed by Garris for ABC, may also go into production this year, though both of these projects have had more false starts than the Vikings' Mike Rosenthal (according to Google).

#### Zone Notes

Cemetery Dance Publications is working on a project called *The Illustrated Stephen King Trivia Book* to be co-edited by Brian Freeman and myself. We'll have more details about this exciting and fun new project next issue.

Readers of the British magazine *Radio Times* voted *IT* as the scariest television program of all time. In second place, *The X-Files*, with *Twin Peaks* coming in sixth. The remaining programs were British telecasts, including a BBC spoof

documentary called *Ghostwatch* that came in third.

King contributed a review of *Pharos: A Ghost Story* by Alice Thompson to the *Boston Herald* at the end of December. It was far from a rave ("a gaudy gothic music video of a novella that whirls with weirdness and doesn't make a lick of sense.") but King grudgingly admits that he "sort of liked it. Admired it, even," primarily because the author kept her nutty improvisational quality brief. The book has the sense of being about something, "which it almost certainly is not."

His *Entertainment Weekly* essays continue to draw the interest of readers and critics alike. In his December 3<sup>rd</sup> column, entitled "Don't Go to Sleep," King takes the baby boomer generation to task for settling for laugh tracks instead of literature and muzak instead of something by the Strokes or the Hives. For sitting in front of the television instead of going out and for letting our waistlines enlarge while our capacity for mental adventurousness declines. A columnist with the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* accused King of being woefully out of touch. "Maybe we aren't mass consuming popular culture at the rate to which he has grown accustomed. But too much sleep isn't the problem... trust me, there's still precious little of it." King missed some issues because

of his illness but a January issue said that his column would "return to this page in the near future."

Shawn Lealos, the director of the dollar baby I KNOW WHAT YOU NEED reports that the film is in postproduction. The main goal of Starving Dogs Productions in 2004 is to complete the movie as soon as possible and get it sent out. Lealos says that he is re-editing the film to make it less boring and to remove directing and photography flaws. He also wrote two new scenes to add more action and horror and to give actress Keia Booker more screen time.

New Amsterdam Entertainment is currently developing STEPHEN KING'S THE NIGHT FLIER II: FEAR OF FLYING, which may be one of the wordiest titles in existence. Writer and director Mark Pavia returns for this film. Pavia, who is now married to Julie Entwisle, star of the original THE NIGHT FLIER, originally thought about bringing Miguel Ferrer's Richard Dees character back as a TERMINATOR-style servant to Dwight Renfield, but decided against it. The Renfield character and Katherine Blair (Entwisle) will be returning.

Robert David Cochrane, director of the dollar baby LUCKY QUARTER, was also the winner of the American Gunslinger video contest sponsored by Viking and

Scribner. He will get to travel to New York this spring to meet King and will receive signed copies of Dark Tower books. He hopes also to present the first copy of LUCKY QUARTER, his ten-minute adaptation, filmed in a casino in Henderson, Nevada in December, to King. The story was originally set in Carson City but Cochrane moved it to southern Nevada to avoid logistical and budgetary nightmares. His film was sponsored by the nonprofit Women in Film and had support from IndieGem Films and Got Film. Cochrane is a former Caesar from Caesars Palace.

#### Outside the Zone

Richard Dooling's name has come up a few times in my recent columns. His name may have first come to Stephen King readers' attention when King quoted some passages from Dooling's third novel, *Brain Storm*, in a section of *On Writing* discussing colorful language. "I like words," Dooling told me. "Vulgar ones are just bracing varietals. I was happy that Steve liked my writing, because I like his, and I was proud to be quoted in *On Writing*. We both like slang. He's the master of it. Take a tour through the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* and note how many examples are illustrated by Stephen King

quotes." Dooling's only book-length non-fiction work, *Blue Streak: Swearing, Free Speech and Sexual Harassment*, explores this subject.

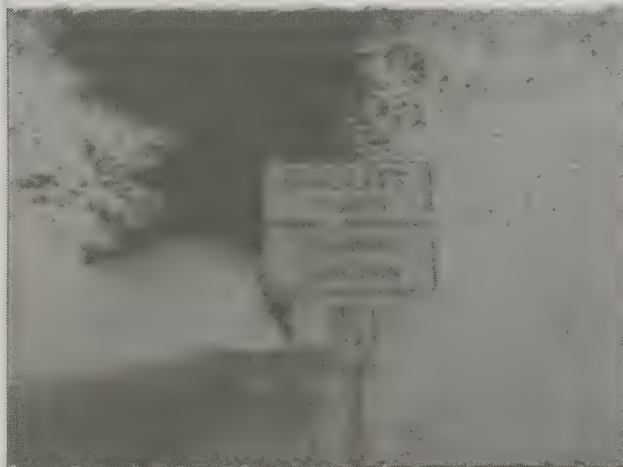
King and Dooling struck up a friendship after King sent a copy of *On Writing* to Dooling. Ultimately, Dooling was hired as a creative consultant for *Kingdom Hospital* and to write four of the thirteen episodes.

Dooling is also the author of four novels: *Critical Care*, *White Man's Grave*, *Brain Storm* and *Bet Your Life*. *Critical Care*, which Dooling describes as "a black comedy about medicine and the right to die," was adapted by Sidney Lumet and *White Man's Grave* was nominated for a National Book Award.

He's had a diverse career, starting out as a respiratory therapist, studying and practicing law and now writing novels and miniseries. "When I was a full-time lawyer, I liked writing appellate briefs. I don't write briefs any more. At least not this year. I also do opinion pieces for the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* on occasion. Screenwriting and writing teleplays for television are the most challenging for me because I came to them later in my career, but I enjoy that challenge."

He also specialized in web-based legal products, which he describes as

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"custom-made training and continuing education presentations," which his St. Louis law firm puts together for large clients with far-flung operations and delivers via the Internet. "It's the equivalent of a legal seminar on, say, the law of sexual harassment or insider trading, delivered in a 20-30 minute web 'experience' that uses everything from *New Yorker* cartoons to humorous case summaries to teach the user how to avoid or respond to illegal sexual harassment or insider trading in the workplace."

Between his work in respiratory therapy and enrolling in law school, Dooling traveled to Africa, an experience that led him to write *White Man's Grave*. He married after his Africa trip, so he decided that law would help him better provide for his family. He had given up on his hopes of getting published and earning a living from writing fiction. As a lawyer, at least, he was writing most of the time. In his fiction, he sometimes lampoons lawyers but says he bears no ill will toward the profession. "I am an equal-opportunity satirist. I poke fun at doctors and lawyers and any other profession I know enough about to portray. I think Chekhov (a doctor) said, 'Doctors are just the same as lawyers; the only difference is that lawyers merely rob you, whereas doctors rob you and kill you, too.' Now that's funny."

His interest in writing started when he was sixteen, when he penned his first short story. He wrote all through college and won a contest at St. Louis University. He gathered a box full of rejection slips and his first novel—about a psych ward—is his trunk novel. Never published "and shouldn't have been," according to Dooling.

The National Book Award nomination for his second novel—though he didn't win—helped in terms of prestige and book sales and greater public awareness of him as an author, but Dooling says the nomination didn't affect him or his writing. "Awards and public recognition and even book sales are things completely out of a writer's control. To think about them is death for your writing. It would be kind of like trying to change your personality to make yourself more popular. Not something I would do or recommend. When people say to me, 'Why don't you write like Tom Clancy and make a bajillion dollars?' to me, that's like asking, 'Why aren't you taller?' I think Nabokov said, 'When it comes to judging your own work, rely on the

sudden erection of your small dorsal hairs.' This is good advice."

Catholicism and religious issues play a significant part in Dooling's novels. His characters are often put in a situation where the big questions are being asked. Characters grapple with their beliefs and imply that the judgment of others has been damaged by religious beliefs ingrained during childhood. In *Critical Care*, for example, the big question is the right to a dignified death and what constitutes end of life. In *Brain Storm*, a young lawyer is assigned to defend a man accused of a hate-crime murder and finds himself in the middle of a controversy over neurological examinations of organic brain differences in criminals and whether any alleged differences are mitigating factors in their crimes.

Dooling says that all plots, regardless of their religious inclinations, move deathwards. "I hope a Muslim or a Mormon would read my fiction and make the necessary internal adjustments to enjoy my stories. Everybody grapples with death and what comes after it...all the way back to Gilgamesh. The big questions make for the best stories, that's all."

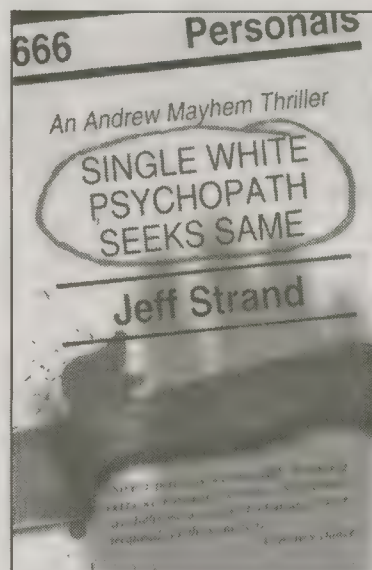
Another common element in his novels is a series of strong, cold and calculating females who use sex—or the promise of sex—to manipulate the protagonists. Once they get what they want from them, they tend to turn off. When I mentioned this to Dooling he said, "Cancel my last answer. I meant to say that all plots move sexwards. Freud was more than a little weird, but he did identify sex as the primary drive out of the self. Otherwise we'd all sit in rooms and read. At least I would. So again, sex, the intrigue that leads up to it, the fallout that ensues afterwards, the fidelities and infidelities—all make for good stories."

I asked him how his female readers responded to his women characters. "What sort of feedback from women? It's hard for men to write convincing female characters and, from what I've read, also hard for women to write convincing males. Strong female characters, like Dr. Palmquist or Myrna in *Brain Storm* don't seem to solve the problem because many women don't identify with them. Why don't I write like Jumpa Lahiri or Ann Tyler? Why aren't I taller?"

Dooling clearly does his research. The characters in *Bet Your Life*, a thriller set in the exciting world of life insurance (trust me, it works), are convincingly

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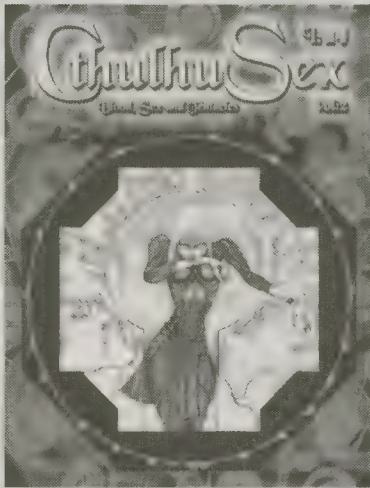
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depicted as highly skilled geeks who know their way around computer networks and UNIX operating systems, as well as being experts in insurance and fraud investigation. As someone married to an ICU nurse, I can attest that his depiction of life in an ICU in *Critical Care* is very true-to-life. I asked him how he approaches research for a new project.

"I worked in ICU units for years, so my depictions of them better be convincing. I've worked with computers since 1982. I enjoy computers and appreciate the lure and dangers of technology. When it comes to something like the neuroscience in *Brain Storm* or the insurance fraud in *Bet Your Life* I am attracted to the subject matter first, and then I find out everything I can by reading good books about it. After I read, then I usually go visit some neuroscientists or fraud investigators, who inevitably provide graphic, particularized illustrations of the book learning."

Dooling and King worked on *Kingdom Hospital* on an episode-by-episode basis. "We loved the main characters Lars had made, and we were free to pick and choose from the *Riget* stories. Much of the over story is pure Stephen King. Then we also added many other minor characters and ghosts and stories to go with them in the individual episodes. Generally speaking I helped Steve only with medical terminology and medical minutiae and dialogue in his episodes, and he helped sprinkle horror in mine. As a rule, I didn't mess with his stories, and he didn't mess with mine."

Even with the scripts completed and production underway, there was still plenty of work for a writer to do on the set. Dooling has been on location in Vancouver three or four times, though most of the work he was able to do from his home in Omaha. King successfully talked Dooling into doing a cameo for the series but his walk-on part may be overlooked by many. "I was one of many who were grabbed one day to be passers by on a sidewalk. Steve is a better actor. The only parts I've ever wanted to play are the gravedigger in *Hamlet* or the drunken porter in *Macbeth*, mainly because they make me laugh."

Dooling once made an off-handed comment that he was libertarian and the Libertarian party latched onto him as one of their poster children. The author is quick to clarify. "Please note that's libertarian with a small 'l,' as in one who upholds the principles of liberty, not a member of the Libertarian Party.

I learned that the hard way. Really, I'm a political agnostic, I guess. Politics is usually poorly disguised self interest. Didn't Aesop say, 'We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones to public office'? The last presidential candidate I liked was John Anderson in 1980, only because I was still naïve enough to believe in politics."

The future looks busy for Dooling, who keeps his readers updated at [www.dooling.com](http://www.dooling.com). If *Kingdom Hospital* is well received, there's a good chance that it could get picked up for subsequent seasons. In closing, I asked Dooling what he had on his schedule. "I am currently receiving regular electroshock therapy from Doctor Gottreich at the Kingdom Hospital psychiatric unit, and I expect to be writing again very soon."

### The O-Zone

"O" as in oops. In issue 47 I attributed the slice-of-life articles accompanying the Dark Tower books on Scribner's web site to Tabitha King. Scribner publisher Susan Moldow informed me that Brant Rumble, a Scribner editor who has worked closely on the Dark Tower books and other King novels from that publisher, wrote them. My apologies for the error.

### End Zone

Thanks to Rick Dooling for his time answering my questions. Next issue I'll review *Song of Susannah* and should have lots more about *Kingdom Hospital*. I'll also have an interview with Mick Garris about *Riding the Bullet*.



Do you have King news? If so, e-mail [BevVincent@BevVincent.com](mailto:BevVincent@BevVincent.com). You can also FAX items c/o Cemetery Dance at 410-588-5904. Next time you're on the 'net, check out my website: [www.BevVincent.com](http://www.BevVincent.com). The message board has breaking news threads and also a little bit about my projects.



# STRIKING TERROR

Lawrence C. Connolly

Karl Edward Wagner once wrote that LAWRENCE C. CONNOLLY'S fiction "shows the power than can be communicated in 1,000 words." Indeed, Connolly has produced a string of powerful shorts over the years—from "Echoes," which has been translated into half a dozen languages since its first appearance in *Twilight Zone Magazine*, to a trio of vignettes in the Stoker Award-winning anthology *365 Scary Stories*. His most recent short, "Striking Terror," explores the cutting edge of paranoid obsession.

Today, Donny intended to do something about the terrorists who were hiding in his apartment.

"What's in the bag?" Becky asked.

Donny faced the wall, waiting for the elevator to move. It wasn't that he disliked Becky. She was cute: blue hair, pierced brow, studded dog collar. In less complicated times, she might have been his friend. But Donny had terrorists to deal with.

The elevator rose.

Becky eyed the wooden handle poking from Donny's bag. "Looks like a big hammer," she said. "You building something?"

Donny shrugged.

The elevator stopped at five. Sarge stepped on, carrying a slab of cake—a treat from his girlfriend. For the past five weeks Sarge had been dating the woman in the apartment below Donny's.

Sarge noticed the bag. "That an ax?"

The door closed. The elevator rose.

Sarge leaned against the wall. As usual, the man was wearing his marine boots. He'd been out of the service twenty years, but he still wore the boots. "Why do you need an ax, Donny?"

The door opened.

Donny hurried out, cradling the bag, making a bee-line for his apartment.



Donny placed the bag on his kitchen table and opened the fridge. Stuff was missing. The terrorists had voracious appetites. They'd finished the chocolate cake, leaving an icing-smeared box on the bottom shelf. And one of them had eaten the olives off the leftover pizza. Fortunately, they didn't drink beer. Donny slipped a cold one from the rack and walked into the living room. The place looked empty, but the terrorists were sneaky bastards. Experts at hiding. Quiet as dust.

There were dents on the couch: one butt print for each cushion. Judging from the size of the prints, the butts all belonged to males of medium build, between the ages of twenty and thirty-five.

Across from the couch, the TV flickered. Sound down. Closed captions engaged. Donny read the words beneath the talking heads. It was the same old stuff: ... *terrorists are among us, hiding, ready to strike...*

It was enough to make you crazy.

Donny slapped the power button. The screen cracked, going dark as he surveyed the terrain of his one-bedroom apartment.

Two doors stood open at the far side of the living room. One door led to the bath, the other to the bedroom. A third door joined bed and bath, but Donny couldn't see it from where he stood. If the terrorists wanted to elude him, they needed only to keep moving as he pursued them, round and round, room to room, circling in a mad game of in-and-out-the-windows.

Donny put his beer on the TV and returned to the kitchen.

His bag was still on the table, the long wooden handle poking from its crumpled top. He parted the crumples and reached inside, leaving the big handle alone as he removed a staple gun and a spool of wire. He stapled one end of the wire to the molding that framed the kitchen door. Then he stretched the wire down at a diagonal, stapling it again on the frame's opposite side. He continued, back and forth, weaving a cage across the door. "No way out!" he shouted, loud enough for the terrorists to hear. "We end this thing today!"

He returned to the table, grabbed the wooden handle, and pulled out the ax. "Right here! Right now! *Mano a mano!*"

He returned to the living room.

The air hummed with false silence as he stared toward the bedroom door. He saw only his dresser and the corner of his unmade bed. The rest of the room lay hidden. But that was about to change. The day of full disclosure had arrived.

The ax hummed as he wheeled it back across his shoulder. He stood a moment, poised, his shadow cocked against the egg-shell wall, cast by the apartment's only window—the sliding-glass door that opened from the living room to a step-out balcony. Six floors below, traffic honked and roared, and behind each engine and horn was a driver doing his best to go on with life in the face of continued threats. *Yes, Donny thought, gripping the ax. I'm doing this for them as well as for me.*

He swung.

WHAM!

The ax slammed the wall, biting deep, kicking up a plume of plaster dust. He pulled back, dislodged a chunk of wall, and swung again—working up a sweat until his bedroom appeared beyond a widening hole. Within minutes he had a window. He looked through. Too late! No one there. The bastards had fled to the bathroom.

"Think you're smart?" Donny stepped back and swung again. "Think you can hide?" He swung harder, faster, filling

the apartment with ax-blade thunder. The neighbors would hear. They'd complain, maybe have him evicted. But Donny didn't care. He couldn't stop. He was a jackhammer, a razing ball, a one-man demolition machine.

"You can run, but you can't hide!"

He kept working, reducing the bedroom and bathroom walls to a pile of debris, expecting at any moment to uncover the crouching cell, or, if not them, some piece of concealed weaponry, spoor, or equipment...

But there was nothing. Just plaster and wood — and electric wires that sparked against his swinging blade.

He paused, catching his breath, and it was then that he heard heavy boots kicking the kitchen door.



He turned and peered toward the apartment's last-standing wall, the brick partition that separated the living room from the kitchen.

*BAM!* The kitchen shook. *BAM!* The terrorists had slipped past him and were now pounding at the wired-shut door. Kicking and shouting: "Goddamnit!" *BAM!* "Goddamnit, Donny! Open this friggin door!"

*BAM!*

The final *BAM!* gave way to a thunderous twang — a boinging crescendo like the scream of an exploding harp.

Donny rounded the wall in time to see the door fly open, swinging back to slam a counter piled high with dirty plates and pizza boxes. And there, standing in the open doorway...

Donny blinked, leaning forward, trying to comprehend.

The terrorists were gone, but three faces peered in. He knew the faces: Becky, Sarge, and Sarge's lady-friend from the apartment below. As always, Sarge wore his boots — heavy suckers, big enough to kick a door from its frame.

Sarge said, "The hell you doing, Donny?"

Donny didn't answer. It was all painfully clear. The veil had been lifted. He knew the truth. His neighbors had set the terrorists free. They were conspirators.

"Put down the ax, Donny."

Donny felt the handle tingling in his hands.

"Down, Donny! Put it down now!"

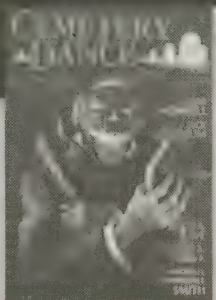
There was only one thing to do.

Donny charged.



When the work was done, Donny returned to the center of his gutted apartment, dripping blood on the rubble as he paused before the living-room window. Plaster dust covered the glass. He wiped it away and looked out at the city — a maze of buildings, walls within walls, so many secrets, so many conspirators.

He was going to need a bigger ax.



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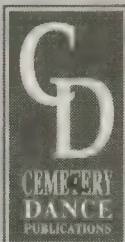
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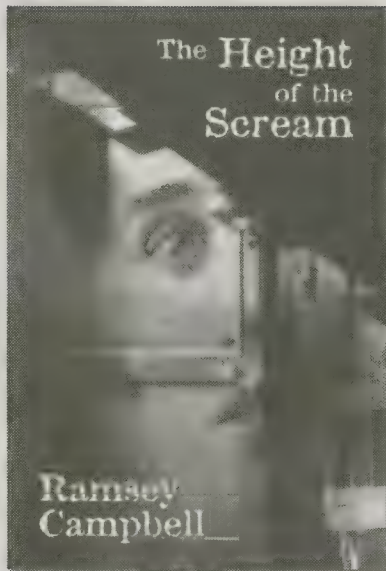


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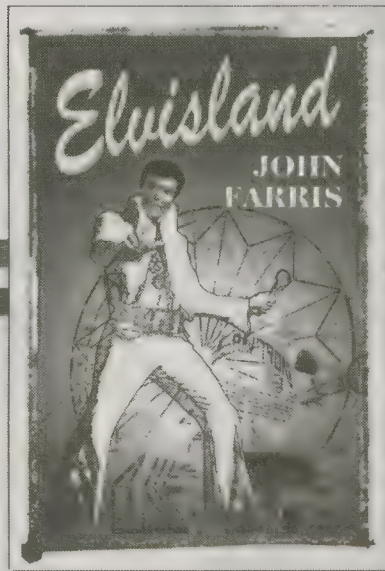


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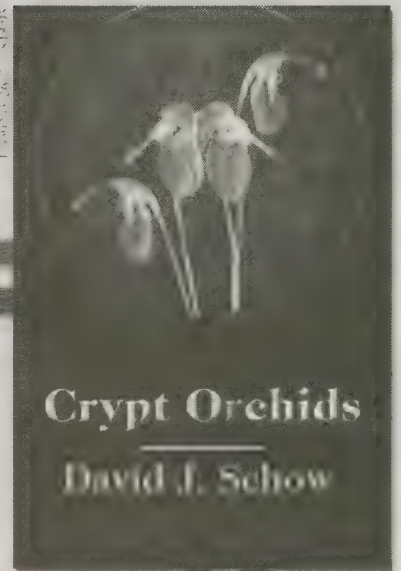




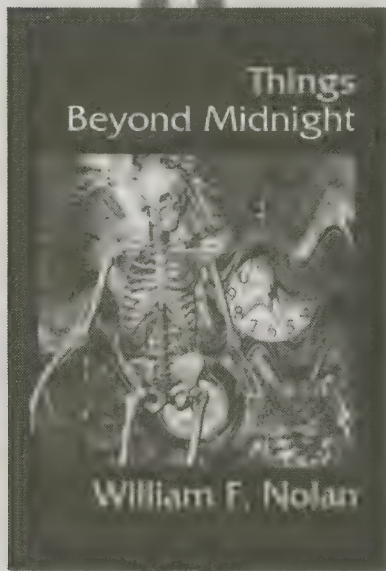
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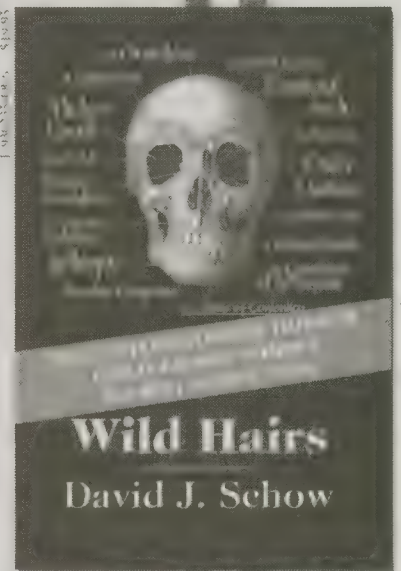
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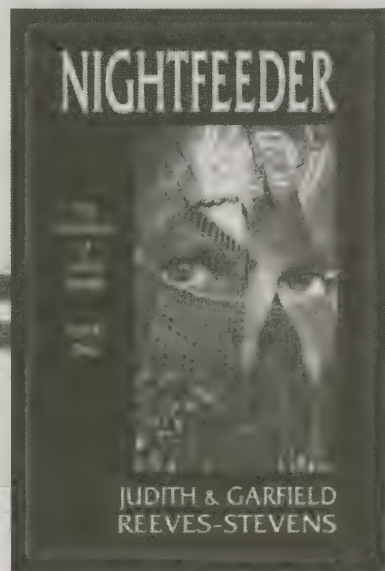
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# THOMAS F. MONTELEONE

## THE MOTHERS AND FATHERS ITALIAN ASSOCIATION

### *The Longest Day*

*"I've been reading your book, and I had to write to say Congratulations! Your observations are so dead-on, clever, and sadly too true."*

—Richard Matheson

*On your MAFIA columns from Cemetery Dance, I wanted to say congratulations on a great job. They are consistently entertaining, and are always among the best parts of the magazine.*

—Matthew Costaris

*Your recent columns have been more to my liking, more about what I subscribe to CD to read in the first place, and I thank you for that.*

—Mark Williams

*I got so much hooked on The Mothers And Fathers Italian Association, that I spent the whole day and half of the night reading it (and laughing my head off). It is wonderful! I especially dig the "Hate Puppets" story, because it reminds me on my own experiences with people from the film business—they are mainly idiots.*

—Ronald Hahn, Germany

*I greatly enjoyed your column in CD this month (about getting interviewed by incompetents). I've worked in PR/marketing for a few years now, and it was spot-on.*

—John Harvey

AS I WRITE THIS, there's snow piled up outside so high I could do a backflip off the second-floor deck, and not kill myself. This morning it was minus twenty on the thermometer, and I have *no* idea how the original colonists survived this bullshit. The Ravens lost their playoff game because of a knucklehead penalty and I'm not what you would call happy about it.

But it's time to move on, and we've got important stuff to be talking about. Before we start, I want to take a minute to thank the many hundreds of you faithful readers who have ordered my M.A.F.I.A. omnibus. It continues to be a hot seller, has been nominated for a number of awards, and is on its way to becoming that thing they call "a modern classic."

Okay, I can dig it. Keep heating up the ether with your e-mails and send me anything you want except baked goods and other homemade stuff. Even though it looks great, Elizabeth tells me one of you will eventually get pissed off enough to send me some of those really special strychnine sugar cookies...so she doesn't let me eat them—even though the life insurance premiums *are* up to date.

So...speaking of Christmas and Elizabeth, I may now segue into this month's mind-fodder. Our story begins when she gave me one of those boxed set DVD collections for Christmas—called *24 Season One*. The reason she did this? Well, I had never seen a single minute

of *24*, nor had she, and over the past few years, we have heard good feedback about the show from such a wide range of people (plumbers, professors, writers, entrepreneurs, and even ESPN's largely obnoxious, wrong-headed Tony Kornheiser), that we decided we should eventually check it out.

We never did. That's largely because we don't spend a lot of time sitting around bathed in the narcotizing glow of all those cathode rays. We're usually far too busy and involved in life and work to watch what they call Regularly Scheduled Programming. I've never seen *Survivor*, *American Idol*, or any other Robert Sheckley TV<sup>1</sup>, and I'm quite certain my life is enriched no less for the omission. Most of it looks like the kind of vapid mookery Elizabeth and I spend our lives trying to avoid.

But...*24* was getting hype and recs from lots of places, and it had made us at least curious to see what it was all about; and why so many people were hanging words like "unique" and "innovative" and "challenging" on it.

And so, in that slack-time between Christmas and New Year's when your agent may as well have fallen into a

<sup>1</sup> If you don't know Sheckley, or the reference to "The Prize of Peril," you should be sent to your room immediately to read some material by the man who published more stories in *H. L. Gold's Galaxy* magazine than any other writer, including Sturgeon, Heinlein, Vance, and all the rest.

crack in the earth and editors are on extended vacations, we decided we would put Disk One in the DVD player and see what-up. About five days later, we watched the twenty-fourth and final episode of what the fans call Season One.

What happened between Hour 1 and Hour 24 is what we're gonna talk about.

What follows will be your Padrone's analysis of that first season, but with the added perspective of being a writer and editor and screenwriter—as well as a viewer. It's not intended to just be an extended review of a television series. You can get that in venues as diverse as *TV Guide*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Film Threat*. What I want to do is talk about the basic elements of storytelling and why we hold different media to different standards. 24 is an interesting subject because it represents a sincere<sup>2</sup> effort to step out of the normal constraints of series television.

I'll probably digress a lot and get distracted (c'mon, you know what it's like around here...), but I'll try to keep the following things in mind.

1. Most viewers watched 24 on a weekly basis—spreading out their total experience of the show over five months.

2. Most viewers were *not* writers or voracious readers.

3. Most viewers were making a serious investment or commitment to watch the show *every week*.

The reason I even mention any of these rather obvious truths is because they did *not* apply to my wife and me. We never were "average" or "normal" viewers<sup>3</sup>, which, of course, changes merely everything. What follows, then, will not be average or normal responses to the material. Of course, that's not what you look for in this column anyway, right?

Okay, so Disk One is in the player, and we watch Hour One, and the next three as well. I have no desire to summarize the plot or even delineate particular scenes just for the sake of summary.

---

<sup>2</sup> A relative and elusive term in Hollywood, I realize, but I employ it under the belief that the creators of this show really wanted to do something different on network prime-time.

<sup>3</sup> Need I say it? We aren't really average or normal in anything—having carved out comfortable niches way out on the left side of the bell curve a long time ago.

Our general impressions were favorable. The interior sets were convincing because they didn't have the high-gloss, ultra-tech look we have come to expect. Instead, we see the nerve center of the CTU (Counter Terrorist Unit) looking pretty low-grade industrial, and in serious need of budget transfusions. So far, so good. That the general locale was good old familiar L.A. and its immediate surrounds gave it the serviceable but lamentable "look" of the last fifty cop shows shot in that town. The main characters of Jack Bauer, Nina Meyers, and Senator David Palmer are fairly well-drawn in the early episodes, and the supporting cast ranges from believable (Tony Almeida) to totally *not* (Jack's idiot daughter). There are also some secondary characters who promise to be interesting as things develop—David Palmer's wife and Bauer's boss. There are other characters who are not credible at all, largely because of casting problems.

The biggest driving force of each episode is one of the oldest tension tricks in the Great Book of Storytelling—the ticking clock. In fact, we see the clock a lot. And the producers, in their efforts to be true to the real-time concept, even allow for the gaps created by the commercials.

The details of the actual plot as it darts from place to place, over-the-shoulder, of several main characters, are not all that important. The overall story mosaic is laid out like the classic multiple-POV novel, and we get used to the alternating rhythms of the parallel story-lines in a hurry. There is an earnest effort by the directors and writers to keep things moving at a clip that is fast enough to pull everyone along, but not so accelerated as to blur things for the more slope-browed viewers.

In the early episodes, we see a lot of techno-jargon and keyboard magic—enough to have us believe the CTU computers can do *anything*, and if you want the story to work on even the most basic level, you have to not question that level of functionality. That said, we are also asked to believe that the Bad Guys, running their end of things on an abandoned ranch in the middle of Nowhere, are also outfitted with a mini-Crystal Mountain deployment of Really Neat and Powerful Electronics. This illustrates a technique that repeats itself from hour to hour on this series: whatever anyone needs to make the plot go, they just seem

to *have*—whether it's a gadget, ability, or information. Everybody's got what they need to keep this thing burning at full force.

Again, we were willing to accept this because the plot did seem pretty complex, and the execution of multi-tracked scenes was better than usually seen on network television.

But as we reached about 8 hours into the 24, things started to go awry. For a variety of reasons:

1. *Poor Characterization*—some of the secondary characters do things that do not make sense, while others, because of their "look" or lack of thespian acumen, reduce things to amateurish levels. The actor who plays David Palmer's son is plagued by an *arsenal* of elements, all of which undermine his ability to make us believe he's for real. For example: (a) his motivations for doing what he does are thin and illogical when examined closely; (b) the writers have saddled him with clunky dialogue; and finally (c) he's a bad actor. The character of Jack Bauer's daughter becomes more and more unlikable because she continually does things, which *no thinking person* would do. If the daughter is presented with two choices, for convenience of plot complication, she invariably chooses the *dumber* of the two. It becomes so tiresome that Elizabeth and I began cheering for the Bad Guys to just *kill* her and be done with her—no one that stupid deserves to hang around and keep getting paid. The same thing happens to the character of Jack Bauer's wife. She portrays herself as totally hapless, seemingly unaware of the gravity of the events enveloping her, and without the intelligence or perspicacity to deduce *anything* that might help her desperate situation. She moves through the plot with all the direction and élan of a badly-lacquered mannequin on casters. She becomes less than useless and generates nothing other than anti-sympathy. (Somebody...please! *Shoot* her!)

2. *Lazy Plotting*—this is painfully obvious about 18 hours into the season when kidnapping/abduction is used *three* times to keep the plot moving. After the third force-feeding of this device into the action, we started laughing—not the intended reaction, I'm sure. Throw in a case of lightning-amnesia that appears and disappears within an hour or two, and at least three instances where a character can either (a) provide information that will stop the plot dead

or (b) remain *strangely mute* so the plot can race ahead like a locomotive with a dead engineer at the controls. I can't remember the details, but at least three times we found ourselves yelling "Tell him!" because a little logical exposition would solve the crisis of the moment. Not gonna happen. No way. We got a plot that needs a serious goosing, Jack. So don't you say a word...

3. *Illogical Actions and Reactions* — these abound throughout the entire season, but sometimes they are so egregious they cannot be ignored. A particularly irritating one occurs when Jack's wife and daughter escape (yet another) attempt to kill them. They run off in a car through typically crowded L.A. neighborhood streets, replete with all those shitty-looking strip malls and parking garages. There are cars and people *everyfuckingwhere* as the Bad Guys begin the chase after mom and daughter. Cut to a commercial. When we come back, where do we find our two women in jeopardy? Might they be heading towards a heavily congested intersection or look for the nearest police station, firehouse, or even one of the endless strip mall parking lots? No, no, no. We find them driving along that one section of Mullholland drive that looks like it's winding in and out of Vasquez Rocks or maybe the dark side of the moon. You know the stretch — the one where there appears to be *nobody* for thousands of miles. The question occurs to any sensible person: why are you driving out here where *nobody* could possibly help you? However, the scriptwriters are very clever; because what happens next makes us forget that salient point — mom pulls the car off to a little switchback road, and does what anyone being pursued by killers in a high-speed vehicle...she gets out and *walks around* to see if she can spot them! No doubt so she can then outrun them on foot. Another event which left us gasping in total disbelief occurs when Jack Bauer and the CTU enlists a young woman to ensnare an assassin. She is portrayed as bright, courageous, scared out of her ass, but determined to do the right thing for her country. When she gets down to crunch time, she undergoes a totally inexplicable transformation into a psychotic killer. Again, the scriptwriters' desired effect of shock, surprise, and tension was lost on us as we both yelled at the screen: "No!" Totally absurd.

Throughout the entire Season, we are treated to the repetitive *sh\*tick* of literally *every* character using cell phones so much, it becomes a fairly safe assumption they have been surgically grafted to their bodies. In day-to-day society, I have found the ubiquity of cell phones irritating when their owners insist on sharing their inane conversations with me, but watching the cell phone overkill on 24 became an unbelievably maddening plot-device. I kept asking Elizabeth how we *ever* managed to tell a story without them? Because I can tell you with certitude the writers of this show would be downright *hog-tied* if their characters had to obey the laws of physics and wait for their phones to recharge once in a while.

Yes, yes, you're thinking...but what did you *really* think of Season One?

Well, despite all the above criticisms (and had I more space, you'd get a truckload *more...*), we liked it enough to stick it out and watch five or six episodes each night until we lurched through the final segment that was supposed to be such a shocker. SPOILER AHEAD: when Jack's wife was killed, we felt relief, not sadness or anger. And we never believed the Nina revelation because she could have subverted most of the plot developments from Jump Street. Why she did *not* is classic plot-by-convenience, rather than logic; facile employment of the *fuck-it-nobody'll-notice* school of filmmaking.

Now, let me make something clear here. I have not performed the peritoneal savaging on 24 just because it's bad TV. That would be unfair. It's *not* bad TV; it's flawed, yet ambitious, and ultimately mediocre. The reason I bothered to examine it at all is to *use* it, and its general acceptance (even among the community of creative types who are friends and associates — writers, artists, musicians, etc.), to demonstrate the different levels of *tolerance* we engage whether watching television or reading.

Which is to say in the simplest of terms: we put up with serious bullshit tonnage when we grab the remote control...something unthinkable when we *read*.

Why?

Well, the obvious call here is that watching television is the ultimate *passive* activity<sup>5</sup>, which means the viewer doesn't need to bring anything to the

<sup>4</sup> C'mon, you've done it too...we've all done it at one time or another.

table other than eyes which remain open. Piloting the sofa doesn't require you to do anything...and *thinking* is way down the list of "maybes."

Reading, however, is the ultimate proactive endeavor. I'm not going to insult you folks — readers all — with the minutiae of that argument. Basically, it's a case of using our intellects, and when we choose to do that, the bullshit-filters come into play automatically. It's like our brains say *okay, if I have to go out and play, I'm going to make it worth my time — which means I gotta ask all those questions that separate careless, arrogant, and trite from thoughtful and fresh.*

The argument remains the same (as it must be) for most pop culture stuff. You have to ultimately ask yourself *what* you want from the time you invest in entertainment. 24 is hardly unique in its demand that you check your capacity for logic and intelligence at the door and *not* lose your ticket. Some people have told me they watch 24 with the same mindset needed to watch the old Republic serials or to read super-hero comics. Okay, that's valid enough, I guess. My only problem is with the presentation of the product — the producers and net-execs responsible for 24 would have us believe their show is something special...and it's not.

After all the dust settled and the final disk was slid into its multi-folding case, two questions remained to be answered:

1.) Would we have the discipline and drive and dedication needed to watch this show every week? On a schedule? On a "must-see" agenda?

No.

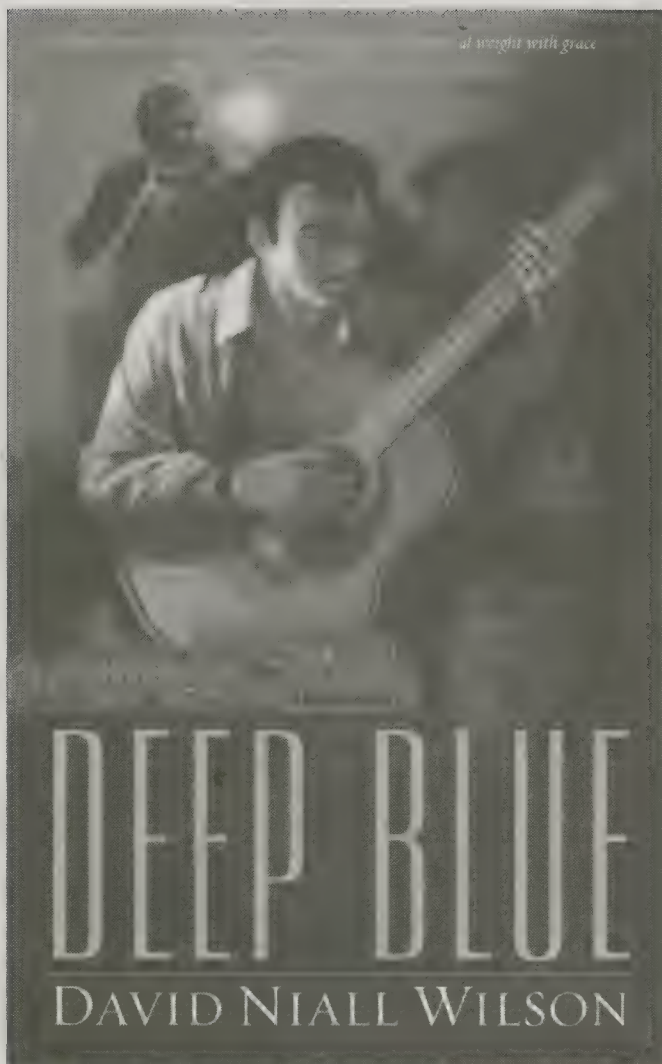
2.) Would we be scaring up a DVD boxed set of Season Two?

No.

Life is too short to spend on "days" like this show. Because when you boil off all the fat, the skeleton you're left with is basically the same old car-chase-L.A.-bullshit-cop-show with international bad guys and a lot of characters who must choose poorly instead of acting with logic or common sense.

Ho-hum. Back to my reading chair...

<sup>5</sup> Kind of an oxymoron when you think about it...



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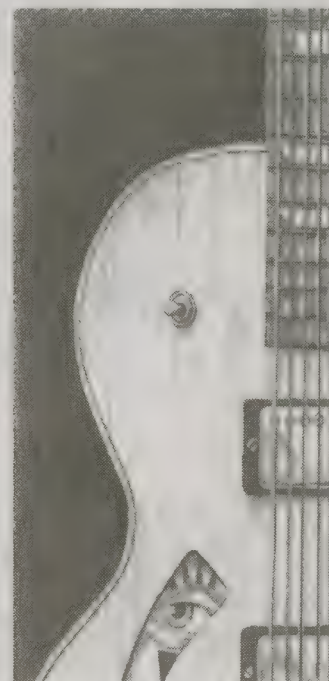
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*What do they have in common?*

*What do they have to fear?*

*What are you waiting for?*

*"Crossroads, or the crosshairs boy, there's nothin' in between..."*





# Hook House

Sherry Decker

SHERRY DECKER first wrote 'pretend' in 2nd grade. A few decades later she began submitting and selling pretend stories to small presses and achieved small but steady success there. A friend introduced her to Jack Remick, a University of Washington writing professor and she studied with him for two years. A short time later she won First Place in the NTPWA fiction contest and sold that story to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. During the years 1997-2001 she published and edited, *Indigenous Fiction ~ wondrously weird & offbeat*. It was five years of exhausting and rewarding work. More recently her fiction has appeared in *Black October*, *Space and Time*, and *Black Gate*. Sherry is very happy to now have one of her stories appear in *Cemetery Dance*, the pinnacle of horror magazines.

The route Mother took to the coast wound and twisted through valleys, beside farms and rivers and around the south end of the Olympic Mountains. During that three-hour drive from Seattle to Aunt Jessie's house, she repeated the things she had been repeating for several weeks.

"Remember to say 'please' and 'thank you,' and to use your table napkin. Never shout or run inside the house. Wash your face and hands and comb your hair before coming to the table and be sure to eat everything on your plate, even if you don't like it. And I'm not saying that you shouldn't talk, Sara, but don't ask questions. Aunt Jessie is a very private person and she wouldn't like to be questioned by a six-year-old. We've been invited. We're her guests." I knew Mother was nervous about taking me to meet Aunt Jessie. It was obvious by the way she kept clearing her throat and licking her lips.

My mouth felt dry at the very thought that I was now headed to the same place, and taking Richard to meet my mother. I could barely swallow.

While Richard drove I studied his profile. He was everything I admired in a man. Not only did his blonde good looks captivate me, he was smart, courteous and kind. But most importantly he made me feel special. Not special in the way I'd felt as a child. He made me feel *normal*.

Richard caught me studying him and smiled. "You're positive you remember the way, Sara?"

I nodded. "Up ahead there's a big old barn beside a lake with an island and a sign that says, NO FISHING."

I had hoped for clear skies because I believed sunshine might, somehow, bring good luck. The weather was cooperating. Sunlight sparkled and seagulls circled overhead as we approached the coast. Everything seemed perfect, except that straight ahead, a red, scythe-shaped cloud crouched on the horizon.

"The first time my mother and I drove along this road together I was only six years old," I reminded him.

"From what you've told me about your mother it sounds like your aunt's approval was very important to her."

"It still is."

Richard glanced at me again. "But your Aunt Jessie is dead, right?"

I nodded, wondering how could I explain it all to Richard. How could I describe Mother, or Aunt Jessie, or Hook House? Richard would have to meet Mother and see the house for himself. But then I felt a sudden chill and pulled my summer-weight cardigan closer around my shoulders.

"There's the old gas station," I said, "where Mother always stopped so we could use the restroom. She said it would be rude to arrive at Aunt Jessie's and to rush in to use the bathroom before a proper conversation."

"That sounds awfully formal considering you were visiting family," Richard said.

"When you grow up formal it feels normal."

We both laughed at my accidental rhyme.

The sun painted a golden triangle on my lap through the windshield, and I slid my palms back and forth across it, seeking heat. I wondered if I should warn Richard about things he might see or hear during this visit, but decided against it. He wouldn't believe me anyway.

My faith in the sunshine withered as we crested the last foothill and I viewed the Pacific Ocean. It was streaked gray and green with angry-looking whitecaps.

"Suddenly, I want to protect you instead of introduce you."

"She can't be any worse than my mother," Richard reminded me, "and you survived that introduction."

I was barely listening to him at that point, though. I was reliving my first visit to Hook House as a child of six.



Aunt Jessie's house sat on an eighty-foot bluff overlooking the ocean in a dreary little town called Hook — named after my Great Grandfather, William Hook. The town squatted between two windblown coastal hills. There was a post office, a grocery store, a hardware store and pharmacy, a small white church, an old Community Hall and a gas station with *adequate* restrooms (according to Mother).

Mother's car climbed a long, blacktop driveway that wound up through the trees like a flattened snake. The house was like a well-kept secret, concealed from view except from the side facing the ocean. A carved, weathered sign hung at the entrance to the driveway, nearly hidden by thick salal and rhododendrons. **Hook House - 1905.**

It was raining and windy and Mother parked her car under the portico. At our knock a woman wearing all black with a white apron opened the door and offered to take our coats. I shook my head because chills swept over me at the sight of her. I stared and yet couldn't see her clearly. It was as if she were made of shadows.

"This way please," she said, in a voice that was neither feminine nor masculine. She led us down a hallway to a room with large windows facing the ocean. The wind shook the twisted evergreens on the ledge outside, and raindrops slapped the windows leaving chalky-looking streaks on the multipaned glass.

"Salt," Mother explained, without my having to ask. "The rain here is salty."

I don't remember being introduced to Aunt Jessie. I remember standing there, shivering, with her staring at me as if searching for something familiar in my features. She eventually nodded as if I had passed some kind of inspection, and then she struck a match against the mantel and stooped to light a fire in the fireplace. I tugged on Mother's sleeve and whispered, "Why are the trees crooked?"

"The wind," Mother said. "The branches grow away from the wind."

I studied the stunted, twisted trees outside the big windows, wondering how they would look if they grew somewhere else, away from the wind that cried tears on the windows.

"Ordinary," Aunt Jessie said. "But things that withstand adversity have strength of character." I remember thinking that my aunt had no business answering my unspoken question.

Even after she accepted me as family, Aunt Jessie always frightened me a little. She was taller than most women and she strode instead of walked, even though she used a cane and had a slight limp. She never wore pants, always silk dresses that rustled and had collars of embroidered lace and were hemmed at mid-calf with gold or silver buttons up the front. Her hair was wavy and silver. She always wore earrings and brooches and she smelled like the storage area in our apartment building back home. Her eyes looked icy-blue through her silver-rimmed glasses, and whenever those eyes were aimed at me, I shivered.

Aunt Jessie wasn't just my aunt, Mother explained. She was my Great-Great Aunt, my deceased Great-Grandfather's sister. She never married and had no children. We were her closest blood relatives.

Mother and I slept together upstairs in a big brass bed under an ivory satin quilt. The room's window faced south and we kept it open. I heard the ocean's rhythmic pounding all night long as if the waves were breaking closer and closer. I pictured the waves washing away the bluff beneath us and the big house being swallowed by that midnight water. I nudged Mother and confessed that the ocean frightened me.

"This old house has stood on this cliff for nearly one hundred years, Sara. One more storm won't knock it down."

After breakfast I hurried down to the beach and saw that not a single wave had reached the bluff. The sand there was dry. From then on the sound of the surf seemed soothing and every night I fell asleep to its muted roar.

At times, Aunt Jessie's house smelled wild and foreign to me, like fog, rain, wind and sand all mixed together with ocean-soaked things that washed up on the beach. In the middle of the night, with my feet pulled up inside my nightgown, I decided that the place smelled like time itself.

The housekeeper-cook, Mrs. Soul, didn't live at Hook House. She arrived on foot early every morning and left after dinner, although I never saw from what direction. I remember deciding that she didn't approve of children, that she probably expected me to slip up, to forget the rules. She expected me to chatter, to be loud or clumsy, to maybe break something

valuable. A few times I caught sight of her watching me in the hallway mirror. It was a wide, full-length mirror in a pewter frame. The glass looked deep and the rooms behind me were concealed by bottomless shadows. At first I didn't recognize her. She looked younger, thinner, with black hair instead of steel gray. When I turned around she wasn't there.

I was determined to *not* make the mistakes she anticipated. Instead, I took my shoes off at the door and banged the sand off them. I always tiptoed through the house in soft slippers, the same way Mother did.

On our second evening, Mother called me in from the garden when it was time to wash up for dinner. We headed upstairs and when we reached the first landing, I saw an old man at the top of the stairs. He had a gray beard and was wearing gray flannel pajamas. I halted and Mother bumped into me from behind.

"Who is he?" I whispered.

"Where?"

"Up there. That old man in pajamas."

After a few seconds Mother passed me on the stairs. "Silly," she said. "There's no one there." She reached the top and walked right past the old man. He seemed to say something to her but I didn't hear it and Mother must not have heard him either, because it wasn't like her to ignore someone who spoke to her. That would be rude. Seconds later he was gone.

The old man appeared twice at the top of the stairs during that first visit, and both times Mother didn't see him. I didn't mention the old man again because there had to be something *wrong with me* if he wasn't really there. People like me were locked up in padded rooms. Normal people whispered about people like me.

On our last night there, Aunt Jessie suggested we come back soon and stay longer. Mother smiled and said that we would return after school let out for the summer.

There were things about Hook House and its gardens, and the ocean that I loved, and I was glad to be invited back. But deep inside where I kept my secret thoughts, I shivered, as if cold fingers had stroked my neck.

Aunt Jessie reminded me of a woman I'd seen at Christmas-time stuffing money into the Salvation Army kettle. That woman wore a long fur coat and matching hat as she stepped from a limousine. She looked out of place, stooping down, jamming money into the blood-red kettle, as if she felt guilty about something, as if she were trying to buy something with all that green paper.

It was June when Mother and I returned and stayed for three weeks. We went for windy walks on the beach and collected shells, but we didn't take them back to Hook House. Instead, we decorated stumps, logs, patches of moss and big rocks with them, all along the trail back up the hill.

Halfway between the dunes and the house, before the trail through the woods grew steep, lay a private glen. I named it the *fairy garden*. Mother said there were no such things as fairies, but that if there *were*, it would be the perfect place for them. In that place grew maidenhair ferns and woodland hyacinth, glowing white trilliums and bleeding hearts, forget-me-nots and soft, delicate huckleberry bushes—the kind I'd seen growing from the tops of stumps like bouquets stuffed into brown vases. The trail wound through clumps of blue star creeper, johnny jump-ups and trembling windflowers. I would have spent hours there, inspecting every plant and flower, every tree and fern, waiting for magic sprites to appear, but Mother



always hurried me, saying that it would be rude to delay lunch for a child's fantasy.

"Does Aunt Jessie ever come to the fairy garden?" I asked.

"I doubt it," Mother said. "She has a bad hip and the trail is steep."

After that first visit, Mother and I spent every summer of my childhood at Hook House and I learned some family history during that time. Before building the house, my Great-Grandfather, William Hook, had been in business with a friend. His friend died under mysterious circumstances and some people believed that my Great-Grandfather killed him and built Hook House with 'blood money.' I pictured paper money, wet with slick, red blood.

My own father died when I was two years old. He was an orphan raised by foster parents who were elderly when they took him in, so there was no one to mourn him except my mother. Mother never remarried although she was very pretty with wide green eyes and dark auburn hair. Men often smiled at her but I remember her saying, "I'll never love again." In photographs, my father was tall and blond and very handsome, and his name was Derek Inverness, but his name was never spoken at Hook House. Except for me and the photos, there was little evidence that he ever existed.

The old bearded man continued to roam the second floor and sometimes managed to startle me, but by the time I reached my early teens I ignored him and Mother seemed to forget I had ever mentioned him.

I was given a room of my own on the third floor. Though small, it had a fine view of the ocean through a dormer window, and there was my own bathroom right across the hall. My room was creamy yellow and there was a thick Persian rug on the wood floor and an oak rocking chair in the corner. The bedroom furniture was old but fine quality, Mother said, and I felt very grown-up.

During meals, Aunt Jessie always sat at the head of the table with her back to the sideboard. Mother sat in the middle of the table facing the ocean, and I liked to sit at the far end, with my back to the fireplace. Mornings were often foggy and fires were built in the midst of summer. By noontime, the fog usually lifted and the fire was a pile of orange coals.

The summer I turned fourteen, Aunt Jessie drew me into the lunchtime conversation for the first time.

"What do you think of my gardens, Sara?" she asked.

Surprised, I put my lemonade down. "The rhododendrons are beautiful but I like those pale blue iris best. They're my favorite color."

"That's Cambridge blue, like your eyes."

"I'd grow them at home," I added, "but we don't even have a balcony for pots."

"What would you grow if you had a real garden?" she asked.

"Definitely the blue iris...and roses."

Aunt Jessie's expression changed then. "I used to have a rose garden." She sounded melancholy. "Out where the small fountain is."

"After lunch let's take a stroll there."

"I haven't been out of this house in fifty years," she murmured.

"Fifty years?" I repeated.

Mother caught my eye and frowned. Surely, I could be forgiven *one question* in all those years.

Aunt Jessie's eyes focused on me again. She picked up the little brass bell beside her plate and rang it. Mrs. Soul came from the kitchen and for the first time I realized that the strange woman hadn't changed since I was six years old. She looked exactly the same.

"We'll take dessert in the garden room," Aunt Jessie said and Mrs. Soul nodded.

I helped Aunt Jessie from the table and took her arm. "Sorry, didn't mean to pry," I whispered.

She patted my arm and I felt relieved.

Mrs. Soul served a strawberry trifle and more tea from a brass cart as we settled into wicker chairs with blue-striped cushions. The gardens outside steamed in sunlight and the hired gardeners packed their shovels, rakes and hoes into their truck and left.

The garden room was actually an enclosed porch on the east side of the house, away from the ocean and the wind. The hinged windows were propped open with thin screens separating us from the gardens. I realized that this was probably as close to being outside as Aunt Jessie ever got. I bit my tongue to keep from asking *why*, and I studied my Great-Great aunt between sips of tea and mouthfuls of trifle.

On the table lay a thick album, its cover of tooled leather. In the center was the name, Hook.

"May I look?" I asked.

Aunt Jessie nodded.

I glanced at Mother, but Mother's lips were pressed flat together and her jaw appeared to be locked tight. But she didn't say anything and I knew Aunt Jessie was waiting for me to open the album.

I lifted the cover.

"That's a photo of my brother, William," Aunt Jessie said. "Your Great-Grandfather. He was only sixteen in that photo, long before he built Hook House."

With *blood money*, I almost blurted, but bit back the words.

"And after our parents died, William raised me. He was already a wealthy, successful man by then."

Great-Grandfather Hook was handsome but severe-looking even as a young man. He wore a dark, snug-fitting suit buttoned clear to the collar with a small bow-tie beneath a trim, dark beard. He held a short-brimmed, round-topped hat in his hands.

"It's called a bowler hat," Aunt Jessie said, again reading my thoughts.

I turned the page.

"That's William's only child, Bernice, your mother's mother, and that's her husband, Henry. When Bernice married Henry, she gave up the last name of Hook. As a result, William left Hook House to me."

"Your brother didn't like Henry?" I asked.

Aunt Jessie shrugged. "He neither liked nor disliked him. William simply didn't want Bernice to change her last name. No one can inherit Hook House unless their last name is Hook." I glanced toward Mother who was picking invisible lint from her sleeves.

"Mother's and my last name is Inverness, so neither of us can inherit," I said and turned another page.

After a brief pause Aunt Jessie said, "Names can be changed."

"Who is this?" I asked.

"That's Bernice again, but by the time that photo was taken Henry was dead, buried alive in a landslide below the house."

"Oh, that's so sad," I said.

"Yes. Bernice was pregnant at the time with their second child, and when she heard Henry was dead she developed a fever and lost the baby. The doctor called it 'hysteria' but I knew it was grief. Your mother was only three, so she doesn't remember."

"How awful."

"Bernice buried the child with her own hands at the site of the landslide, and then cultivated the place into a garden—you've gone through it on your way to the beach."

"You mean...the fairy garden?"

Aunt Jessie shrugged. "Bernice was obsessed with that garden. She slaved over it for the entire summer. Hardly slept or ate."

The fairy garden would never again feel lovely and magical. From then on it would be a place of terrible sadness and loss.

"Grandma Bernice looks awful in this photograph," I blurted. "Like a skeleton with hair."

"She lost her mind," Aunt Jessie said. "She often forgot to get dressed and wandered around the grounds in her night-clothes."

"I think Sara has had enough family history for today." Mother took the album from my hands, closed it and put it in a cupboard.

The next day, while running to avoid an approaching storm, I saw Bernice's husband, Henry in the fairy garden. He sat atop a boulder in a shaft of sunlight holding a tiny, naked infant in his hands. The baby waved its arms and kicked its feet and legs. They were there for a few seconds, and then black clouds erased the sunlight and their image vanished. The wind sounded like an infant squealing, and I ran to the house pelted by rain.

At bedtime, Aunt Jessie asked me to her room. Unbuttoning her collar, she pulled a chain from beneath her bodice and asked me to undo the clasp.

Nervous, I fumbled but managed to pry apart the golden claw.

"Here," she said. Loops of gold chain draped my fingers.

"How pretty," I said. At the end of the chain was a two-inch long key. It felt warm in my palm.

"Your Great Grandfather gave it to me for my fourteenth birthday. Now that you're fourteen, you should have it. It used to unlock a hope chest but I gave the chest away a long time ago." Aunt Jessie shrugged. "William said it would bring me luck. It didn't, necessarily, but I believe it protected me somehow. Perhaps it will protect you now."

I wanted to ask, *from what*, but instead murmured my thanks as she fastened it around my neck.



When we returned home for the school year, Mother informed me she was changing her last name from Inverness back to Hook. She asked me if I wanted to be included in that change. I wavered, remembering how my father looked in those old photographs, smiling and handsome. I didn't want to betray him—all I had was his name.

"No," I said, wondering what Aunt Jessie would think. I acquired the habit of fingering the gold key every time I thought about my Great-Great aunt.



Aunt Jessie paid the tuition for me to attend a finishing school. Before moving into the dorm I spent the last two weeks with Mother at Hook House. One night I heard a sound I'd never heard before—slow, deliberate footsteps outside my door. The footsteps traveled in only one direction, over and over again.

Barefoot, I tiptoed to my door. Light from a bright moon fell through the stairwell window, shoving the darkness into the corners. I was startled by the sight of Great-Grandfather Hook and by the sight of wall sconces, the storage room door and the newel post pass directly *through* him as he went by.

Fear chased shivers up my spine, but determined to learn where he came from or where he went, I followed. His head and shoulders looked solid, as if I could touch him. But from the waist down he was diaphanous. Below his knees there was only the sound of leather slippers on the hardwood floor.

I followed him down to the second level where he paused and appeared to gaze toward the landing below. His shoulders slumped as if in resignation. Then, in an instant, he was gone and I was alone—until behind me the footsteps began again.

He came toward me from the end of the hall. I backed up and around the newel post with my heart pounding in my throat. Again, he halted on the top step and then faded. I spotted his twisted body on the landing below and I realized that decades ago he had died on those stairs.



Aunt Jessie announced that she wanted to clear out the storage room upstairs.

"Antique dealers should evaluate some of it," she said. "But go look before I call them, Sara. If you want anything, set it aside."

Again, Mother's expression was bitter looking, as if she felt *she* should have been offered first choice of anything there. After all, she was a Hook. I wasn't.

The storage room was directly across the hall from Mother's room on the second floor. I had never been inside although I had always been curious. Narrow paths zigzagged between stacks of boxes, crates and trunks and around furniture draped with heavy cloths. I opened a trunk near the door, recoiled at the odor of mothballs and dropped the lid. Framed photographs and paintings leaned against the back wall of the room. I brought each frame, one by one, closer to the single overhead light. Eventually, I held an intriguing photograph of Great-Grandfather Hook in one of his snug-fitting suits. He held his bowler hat in one hand and his other hand rested on the back of an ornate chair. A young girl sat in the chair wearing a dark, silky dress, the collar edged with lace. I carried the photograph downstairs and into the Garden Room.

"Where did you find that?" Aunt Jessie asked.

"Way in the back. May I have it?"

She studied it for a moment and then nodded. "Go ahead, I'm certain there are others like it up there."

"Who is the little girl?"

"That's me. I was eight and William was twenty when that was taken."

"How old was he when he fell down the stairs?" I asked. Aunt Jessie looked startled. "Did your mother tell you that?"

I had never heard her sound so angry. I couldn't allow her to blame Mother.

"No, I see him walking around and I've seen him laying there, on the landing."

As always, Aunt Jessie's cold stare made me shiver. Finally, she said, "It's as I always suspected, Sara. Hook blood runs in your veins. You have the gift, with or without the name."



In the middle of the night I awoke to see Mother standing at the foot of my bed. Her face was pale and her eyes wide, their whites glowing like little moons with black hearts.

"Aunt Jessie is gone," she whispered.

"Gone?" I sat up, picturing Aunt Jessie flinging open the door and running through the garden in her nightgown, outside and free for the first time in decades.

"She died in her sleep."

My hand found the key at the end of the gold chain, and I couldn't help but wonder if my Great-Great Aunt should have kept it a while longer, for its luck.

I felt sad but I didn't cry. Aunt Jessie wasn't really gone. I knew I'd see her somewhere in the house, in some room, some doorway, because *I had the gift, with or without the name.*

Mother seemed well-prepared, even eager, to handle the duties that fell to her. The coroner arrived and took my aunt's body away. Mother called a lawyer whose name she had found in an address book and we soon learned that she had inherited the entire estate, except for a small stipend in my name, enough for tuition. I stayed an extra week to help Mother.

"When will you come back to Seattle?" I asked.

"Not until things are all settled here, Sara. Did you find anything else in the storage room you wanted?"

"No."

Mother used the dining room as a temporary office since it was centrally located and had a phone. One end of the long table was covered with papers. While she arranged for the funeral, I wandered into the Garden Room and paused beside the little table where so recently the three of us had shared lunch on a sunny day. I opened the screen door and stepped outside.

The flower beds alongside the house bulged with white impatiens and blue lobelia. Forest birds called from nearby trees and bees buzzed in the poppies. Something smelled sweet and I followed the path toward the fountain.

"Sara? Sara?" Mother's voice sounded frightened. "Sara!"

I hurried back. Through the screens I saw Mother in the garden room, beside the mosaic table, her hand trembling. She opened the screen door, and then jumped back as if from the edge of a precipice.

"Mother, I'm right here. What's wrong?"

"Sara?" she repeated, as if she couldn't see me even though I stood directly in front of her barely an arm's length away. I stepped through the door.

"Oh, Sara!" Mother grabbed my arm and pulled me closer. "For a moment I couldn't see anything."

"I'll call a doctor."

"No. I'm fine now. The sunlight must have blinded me."

I led her to the wicker sofa with its striped cushions, but she shook her head no, and lowered herself into one of the flowered chairs.

Two days later, in the small white church on the hill, I attended Aunt Jessie's funeral alone because Mother had a severe headache. I told her she was trying to do too much and that she needed to get some rest. I had expected to see Mrs. Soul at the service but the austere woman never arrived.

"There weren't any roses at the service, were there?" Mother asked later. "I specifically told the florist, *no roses.*"



The small publishing company in Seattle that offered me employment was on the second floor of the Goreston Building. I met the owner of the building one morning in the elevator. I remember noticing his eyes—a mix of green and gray, like a stormy ocean. The elevator doors had barely closed when the power went out and we were briefly trapped there together.

"Sara Inverness," I said. "Editorial assistant at Skyline Publishers."

"Richard Goreston," he said. "Remind me to reward the electrician."

We shook hands and my fingers tingled. When our eyes met, I was drawn to him in a way I'd never been drawn to anyone before. He held my hand a moment longer than necessary. A week later he invited me to dinner. Seven months later we were engaged.



"Richard wants to meet you, Mother. Can you come to Seattle for a weekend?"

It was then that she admitted her vision had grown even worse and that she didn't drive anymore.

"Have you seen a doctor about your eyes?" I asked.

"I see well enough, and besides, I know every inch of this house. Bring your fiancé here, to the beach. I'll tell Mrs. Soul that there will be three for meals."



As Richard drove around the central fountain and parked beneath the portico, golden sunshine and a gentle breeze greeted us. In the courtyard birds chirped and a cheerful frog croaked. Even so, I shivered.

We carried our overnight bags inside with Mrs. Soul holding the front door open for us. I found myself scrutinizing her appearance, searching for *something* about her that had aged in the past twenty years. I wondered, if I reached over and touched her, what would I find? Flesh or shadow?

Introductions with Mother went smoothly and at dinner Richard complimented her for raising such a fine daughter.

"I can't take credit for the way Sara turned out," she said. "She could have been rebellious, but instead she chose to be agreeable. A preacher's child can become a killer, and killer's child become a saint. I don't think it has much to do with parenting. It has to do with intelligence. Sara is very intelligent."

It was the kindest thing Mother had ever said about me. It was the *only* thing I had ever heard her say about me.

"When I lived in Seattle," Mother said, "I knew a woman with the last name of Goreston. Her first name was Carolyn. Any relation?"

Richard refolded his napkin and placed it beside his plate before nodding. "That's my mother," he said. "But please don't hold anything against me, that my mother might have said. I know how she can be."

Mother picked up the bell and rang it. "Your mother and I had acquaintances in common and we sometimes attended the same social events. But actually, I don't believe your mother has ever spoken to me."

Mrs. Soul shoved open the kitchen door.

"We'll take dessert in the garden room," Mother said.

The three of us stood and Richard took Mother's arm. "I apologize for my mother," he said. "She may have been jealous because you were the lovely and famous Hook heiress."

Mother patted Richard's arm—the same way Aunt Jessie had patted mine.

"One of the infamous Hooks," Mother said with an amused smile.

Mrs. Soul followed with the dessert cart. It was laden with sponge cake, raspberries, custard, a pot of coffee and cream and sugar. I volunteered to serve.

The early evening sunlight cut through the tree trunks and across the lawn, painting everything with gaudy, surreal colors—the grass chartreuse, the sky turquoise, the peonies candy pink. It was one of those moments I knew I would remember, along with the smell of fresh coffee and the delicate chime of silverware on the china. Mother seemed content in Richard's presence, and he in her's. Maybe things would work out after all.

"This place is...I'm searching for the right word," Richard said. "Amazing, wondrous." He shook his head as if those words were inadequate. "From the moment I first turned into the driveway I've felt a sense of *déjà vu*—but I'm certain I've never been here before."

"The first time I saw Hook House," Mother said, "I knew it was enchanted."

"That's it—enchanted." Richard finished his coffee. "If you ladies don't mind, I'm intrigued by that quaint stone path." He exited through the screen door.

A moment later and without planning to, I blurted, "You saw Great-Grandfather Hook, too, didn't you—on the stairs when I was six?"

Mother avoided my gaze for a moment before she nodded. "I thought if I pretended not to see him, he'd go away and you wouldn't see him anymore either."

Mother tilted her head and turned her ear toward the window, eyes wide and full of expectation. "Who is that whistling?" she asked.

"It's Richard."

She smiled, but she looked disappointed. "He's a handsome young man with such nice manners. In some ways he reminds me of your father."



Whenever Richard entered a room, I noticed a change in Hook House, as if daylight grew brighter and shadows withdrew. Rooms appeared bigger, as if the walls shrank back as he passed by. I soon realized that Mrs. Soul avoided entering

a room when Richard was there. She skulked in the shadows or disappeared altogether for hours at a time.

The old photo album had vanished from the Garden Room. I wanted to ask Mrs. Soul about it and went to find her, but even though it was only an hour away from dinner she was nowhere to be found. The lights were off and there was no sign of food anywhere in the kitchen or pantry. Not even spices on the shelves. I searched the house, even the closets. Mrs. Soul was not there.

I entered a large bedroom at the end of the hall on the second floor, a room I had never entered before. Mother once told me that she and my father had shared that room, but that she never entered it again after he died. The room had peach and cream wallpaper, a four-poster bed with a crocheted bedspread and dressers made of cherry wood. No drop cloths—everything was coated with thick dust. It seemed strange for the window to be open and for the lace curtain to be waving in the draft.

I heard Richard whistling outside in the garden. I stepped to the window and pushed back the curtain. He stood below in that odd, late-day sunlight that turned the grass chartreuse and the sky turquoise. His blond hair looked wavy instead of straight and he wore old-fashioned clothes I'd never seen before. He bent and picked a red rose. All around him were rose bushes heavy with blooms of every color—pinks, purples, whites, yellows, oranges—and blood reds. He turned and looked up at me, twirling the rose.

It was my father.

Then he was gone and the rose garden was gone. Instead, I saw the small fountain with water spurting from the mouth of the stone fish. In my fist I held tattered strips of the lace curtain. The window was closed and the latch was coated with thick dust.



Dinner was served on time. Roasted chicken with wild rice dressing, asparagus, baby carrots and button mushrooms in a light sauce. When Mrs. Soul brought the dishes into the dining room from the kitchen, I stood up. Caught by surprise, Richard scrambled to his feet.

"Sorry, Richard. Mother, I'll be right back." I hurried through the kitchen door. A roasting pan soaked in the big sink and the crockery butter mold sat on the counter, damp with chilled condensation. Boxes of spices crowded the shelf above the stove and one of the oven lights glowed. I smelled something sweet baking.

"Is something wrong?" Mrs. Soul said from behind me.

Without answering, I returned to the dinner table.

Had the stark, empty kitchen been an illusion?



Mother moved into Aunt Jessie's old room on the main floor, explaining that the stairs were getting to be too much for her. Mother was only forty-three years old. But from constant squinting the fine lines around her eyes had deepened and she looked older. More like sixty.

Our first evening there I led Richard up to my old room on the third floor. "Do you like it?"

He turned from his view of the ocean. "I love it. Especially since you slept here as a teenager."

I hugged him. "Mother approves of you."

"I had a million questions I wanted to ask her, but I took your advice and bit my tongue instead."

"You can ask me anything," I leaned against him, loving his smell.

"Not a question, exactly. More like a confession—I kept waiting to be introduced to the silver-haired lady in the silk dress and wire-rimmed glasses," Richard said. "Until I realized that she wasn't real." Richard shrugged. "I know it sounds crazy, but she looked as real as you do...well, almost."

"But, Aunt Jessie never sat on the sofa. She always took the big chair with the flowered cushions."

Richard shook his head. "She sat on the striped sofa."

I couldn't bring myself to tell Richard about the ghosts I'd seen at Hook House.

It seemed wise to let him think his one sighting of Aunt Jessie was a singular experience. After a month or so he'd begin to doubt it happened, or distrust his memory of it.

The next day Mother and I had our first cups of coffee in the living room while Mrs. Soul prepared the dining room for breakfast. Richard was on the phone in the hall.

"Richard saw Aunt Jessie," I told Mother. "He described her perfectly." I sighed, trying to relieve the tension in my chest. "I might have been a happier child had you told me the truth sooner."

"Tell a child that she lives with ghosts?" Mother made frowning eye contact in the mirror.

"At least I wouldn't have thought I was insane."

"You thought you were insane?"

"No one else admitted seeing ghosts."

"Breakfast is ready." Mrs. Soul appeared in the entrance just as Richard entered. Mrs. Soul backed away, eyes averted.

Richard helped Mother into Aunt Jessie's old chair with her back to the sideboard. I took Mother's old position in the middle of the table facing the ocean, and Richard sat in my old chair with his back to the fireplace. I tried to picture myself at the head of the table, ringing the little bell and saying, *we'll take dessert in the garden room.*

Later, Richard and I hiked down to the beach. We ran barefoot across the sand toward the lighthouse and returned with the wind at our backs. He listened to the story of the fairy garden and agreed that it lessened the charm of the otherwise magical place. When we reached the house he said a nap sounded more appealing than food, so Mother and I ate lunch in the garden room without him. Several times I glanced at the wicker sofa, expecting to see Aunt Jessie, but she never appeared. Mother repeatedly tilted her head, as if listening for something outside and I knew she listened for the sound of my father, whistling as he picked a rose.

"I thought about what you said, Sara," Mother said, "about how you might have been happier had you known the truth. If you want to know anything now, ask."

"Tell me about Bernice."

"My mother died when I was three. I don't remember her, and I didn't want you hearing how she went insane from grief. Besides, that was just Aunt Jessie's opinion. So many sad things happened before you were born. I didn't want you dwelling on them."

"How did Bernice die?"

"The doctor said she suffocated in her own pillow after taking too many sedatives—according to Aunt Jessie. Doesn't mean it's true, of course."

"And my father?"

Mother stood up suddenly and rested her chin on the edge of the mantel. "The last time I saw your father he was standing in the back yard with sunlight on his hair...holding a rose." Her voice trembled. "He died of a gunshot wound to the head. There was an investigation afterward. I was a suspect, but eventually it was listed as a suicide." Mother sighed again. "He would never have killed himself. We were happy together."

"It must have been awful for you."

"It was in all the newspapers. People shunned me afterwards."

"How did you cope?"

"Having you helped. You gave me a reason to carry on. A few weeks after his death, I secretly scattered your father's ashes in the rose garden. I thought that would be a fine resting place for him, but two weeks later Aunt Jessie had the rose garden torn up and the fountain built. There is no grave for your father."



It was just before dinner that Mother reminded me that no one but a blood relative with the name Hook, could inherit Hook House.

"The entire estate will be yours someday, Sara, but only if you change your name to Hook. If you stay an Inverness or marry and change your name to Goreston, the entire property and investments will pass to cousins out of state."

Richard halted in the entrance to the living room wearing a stunned expression.

Mother went to him and placed her hand on his arm. "Richard, please understand this isn't my decision. It isn't uncommon these days for a married woman to keep her own name."

"Our children must be Hooks also?" he asked.

"If you want them to inherit Hook House, yes."

"But then," Richard said, "the name Goreston dies with me. Personally, I think such an inheritance clause can be broken by a good attorney. I'll look into it."

Later, he admitted that his lawyer hadn't sounded optimistic. Richard hardly spoke or touched his food at dinner. We sat in uncomfortable silence as dark clouds raced inland from the sea. Rain lashed the windows as Mrs. Soul pushed the dessert cart into the room. She kept her eyes down and as soon as I offered to serve she fled.

The china cups and saucers rattled with a cheeriness that ill-matched the mood of the room. Mother didn't suggest moving to the garden room and I think Richard was relieved.

"I'm sorry to have ruined your first visit, Richard," Mother finally said.

"You didn't," he lied.

Mother said she was tired and retired early. Richard and I exchanged speechless, disappointed glances and then we also retired early.



That night I was awakened by the sound of footsteps outside my room again. Moonlight filled the hallway and I immediately saw Grandfather Hook heading for the stairs, except this time another apparition followed him. I followed them both. When he halted at the edge of the top step, the second shadow ran quickly up behind him. It was a woman, bone-thin, with wild, colorless hair. She looked like she had been crying, like she

was still crying. She crashed against my Grandfather, shoving him headfirst down the stairs. His hands clutched and clawed the black air of the stairwell as he fell. I leaned over the railing and for a few seconds saw his twisted body on the landing below. I gasped, looked back at the woman and our eyes met. I felt a sense of panic when I realized that she saw me. She turned and ran down the hall and into the shadows.

Clouds swept across the moon and the hallway was again dark. I stumbled back to my room and locked the door. I don't remember sleeping that night. All I remember is standing there, barefoot, terrified and shivering, and later waking up in bed. But in the light of day I knew what I had seen—Great Grandfather Hook murdered by his own daughter, Bernice.



One month after we returned to Seattle, Richard admitted that he couldn't accept the idea of me or our children not being Gorestons. He wanted me to give up my inheritance. I refused.

"Is Hook House more important to you than I am?" he asked.

"Am I less important to you than a last name?"

A week later, after he hadn't phoned or knocked on my door, I mailed the engagement ring back to Richard. I was hurt. I had expected him to fight harder for me.

I didn't tell him that I already carried his child.



Seven months later, Sean Richard Inverness was born with strawberry blond curls and big blue eyes—my coloring but Richard's features.

"He looks like you," Mother said, but I knew Sean looked like his father. "At least he's not a Goreston," she said. And that, sadly, was true.

Mother arranged for me to receive an allowance from the estate. I resigned from my position at Skyline Publishers, afraid of running into Richard in the Goreston Building.

"My health is failing, Sara," Mother said one day on the phone. "Who knows how much time I have left." She sounded lonely and afraid, so Sean and I moved into Hook House. Sean was a quiet, thoughtful child and wasn't ever loud, fussy or rude. He was bright, sensitive and handsome.

"What a beautiful little boy," I often heard people say.

When he was five years old he came to me one day and said, "Make the silver lady go away, Mama."

"Silver lady?"

He led the way to the third floor, into the room that was once mine, briefly Richard's, and was now Sean's. I paused in the doorway. At first I saw nothing, but then a hazy beam of sunlight gleamed on floating dust motes—and on something else. Gradually, I saw the curved back of a wicker chair and a striped cushion, then the lenses of a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, the bridge of a nose, and finally silver, wavy hair—

"Make her go away," Sean said. "She won't talk to me."

"Go downstairs, but don't tell Grandmother about the silver lady." I said.

Aunt Jessie stood up, leaning on her cane with one hand and waving at me with the other. *Go, she said, without making a sound, but I read her lips. Get away from here.*

"Why?" But clouds covered the sun and Aunt Jessie was gone.

Sean seemed to have forgotten about the silver lady by the time I arrived downstairs. Instead I heard him describing to Mother what he saw outside in the garden through the screens.

"The fountain and flowers and the driveway and the path into the trees, and...a tall man."

"Where?" Mother said. "Where do you see the tall man?" She licked her lips.

"By the fountain," Sean said.

I looked out across the yard but didn't see a man.

"Mother, please don't encourage Sean to see things that aren't there," I said.

"We were just playing a game," Mother replied, "naming things that we can see from here."

"The man is gone now," Sean announced. "I want to go outside now, Mama. This morning there was a little green frog in the birdbath."

"Stay where we can see you," I told him as he raced outside.

When I told Mother about seeing Aunt Jessie in Sean's room, she sighed and said, "We seem to accumulate a new ghost every generation."

That night I couldn't sleep and I finally got up and opened my door. Within seconds, Aunt Jessie materialized in the hallway like the strike of a match. She looked different this time, younger. She passed straight by as if she didn't see me. I followed her to the end of the hallway, finding the door to my parent's old room open. Inside, she stood beside that same spectral wicker chair in which now a blond man sat, his eyes closed, his hands on the armrests, apparently asleep. My father.

Aunt Jessie raised the barrel of a handgun, leveled it at his temple and pulled the trigger. There was no sound, but I saw a burst of flames and smoke, and my father pitched to one side as if he'd been kicked. There was a black hole above his left ear and blood on the wall to his right. Then Aunt Jessie turned and saw me.

I backed out of the room, stumbling, realizing, *Aunt Jessie had murdered my father.*

I wondered if Mother knew.



Sean developed a cough, and his prescribed medicine made him sleepy. After lunch, he napped on the porch swing with a pillow and light blanket while I nudged the swing with my toe to keep it swaying. Mentally I listed the history of Hook House—as much of it as I knew.

Great-Grandfather Hook murdered his best friend for money and built Hook House, disinheriting his own daughter, Bernice because she married and changed her name from Hook. Instead, Grandfather Hook left the estate to his unmarried sister. But did he foster hopes that Bernice might change her name back to Hook—if she were widowed? Grandfather Hook may have murdered his son-in-law, Henry, and in revenge Bernice killed her father by shoving him down the stairs. Years later, Aunt Jessie killed my father so that Mother would change her name back to Hook. Would Mother have changed her name had my father lived? It seemed like such senseless reasons to kill someone—for a name—for an heir.

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By now I believed that Mother knew these things, too. Like me, she *had the gift*.



There is a difference between the sounds of a house settling and the sounds of ghosts.

One night, I heard human footsteps and saw Mother outside the room where Aunt Jessie had murdered my father. Mother entered the room and a moment later she ran back down the stairs, eyes wide, fingertips pressed against her lips. How many times, I wondered, had she returned to witness my father's death? Why did she keep returning? Why did she feed her grief? Or was it grief she nurtured?

At unexpected times I saw Bernice and Great-Grandfather Hook. Every time I witnessed the scene, I noticed something new. Bernice wasn't simply crying—she was saying something. I read her lips. "You killed him. I hate you!" And then she would shove him and he would fall. It was always the same, and yet more clear.

I asked myself, what would I have done under such circumstances? I couldn't imagine.



Sean didn't see the silver lady anymore, at least when I asked about her, he shook his head. As long as he was happy, we would stay. If I suspected that he was frightened, we would pack and leave. I wouldn't risk his health or happiness to rule Hook House.

One day, I asked Mother how long it had been since she had been outside the house.

"Since the night Aunt Jessie died."

Ten years.

Eventually, Mother's health began to fail even though she wasn't yet sixty. She asked me outright to change Sean's and my last name from Inverness to Hook. "Do it for Sean," she said. "And this will all be his someday."

"Give me some time to think about it," I said. "A month."

I didn't want Hook House and I didn't want Sean to own it either. Nothing good ever came to those who did. Mother wouldn't give in, however. She was determined for me to inherit. Finally, in order to make her happy, I agreed to change Sean's and my last name from Inverness to Hook. She spent the next day on the phone with the lawyer. He handled the legalities, keeping one copy of the will for his files and sending two copies to Hook House, one for Mother and one for me. Not only was I to inherit the entire property, but all investments too. The sum staggered me.

That night I dreamed for the first time of Sean clinging to the outermost edge of the bluff while far below the surf churned and roared. Waves crashed around the jagged boulders and white spray leaped against the face of the cliff as if reaching for him. I cried out, but the wind whipped my screams away.

The dream haunted me every night. I knew it was a warning.

I sat up late two nights in a row, reading the will. There was nothing in the inheritance clause that said I couldn't sell the house and property once it was mine.



The next time I saw Aunt Jessie she looked even younger. Her hair was glossy brown and she didn't yet wear glasses. She strode along the hallway without a cane, apparently unaware of me, carrying something in her hands. She stepped into the doorway of the bathroom. I hurried closer and saw her empty a glass of frosty-yellow liquid into the toilet. It looked like lemonade. She washed the glass before smashing it in the waste-basket. Next, she opened a bottle of pills and dumped them into the toilet. She washed the little bottle, and peeled off the label, and dropped the label into the toilet, and flushed it along with the pills and the lemonade. The pill bottle was smashed in the same waste-basket before she returned to the hallway. I stepped aside, but not before her arm brushed mine. As we touched I felt a penetrating, aching cold.

She knelt in the hallway and lifted an unconscious woman, dragging her along the floor and through the closed door of the storage room like smoke through a sieve. I opened the door and saw the storage room as it must have looked seventy years ago, with Aunt Jessie hoisting the woman from the floor and into an open trunk. It was Bernice. Mother's mother. My grandmother.

Barely in time, Bernice jammed one shoe beneath the lid holding it open. Although drugged, she was fighting for her life. She managed to force the trunk open, tumbling Aunt Jessie backwards and down between stacks of wooden crates. Aunt Jessie pulled herself to her feet, favoring one leg, and after a violent struggle, she forced Bernice back into the trunk and slammed it shut. Aunt Jessie collapsed across the lid, gasping, and finally locked it—I recognized that key—she gave it to me when I was fourteen. Then, she concealed that trunk behind a dozen storage boxes, some of them heavy, because she had to heave herself against them again and again in order to move them. Then, with one exhausted, backward glance, she turned off the light and limped from the room. Seconds later the room changed back to present day, containing only the few things that Mother had brought from our old apartment.



Mother seldom got out of bed. I arranged for a retired nurse who lived nearby to attend her during the day. When Mother did feel strong enough to leave her room, she traveled around in an electric wheelchair—the garden room became her favorite place. Even on cloudy or rainy days she sat wrapped in blankets, facing the windows. I knew she saw a garden instead a fountain—she saw my father with a rose in his hand.

Mrs. Soul now avoided me the way she had avoided Richard, and I enjoyed antagonizing her.

"I wonder why I've never seen you leave or arrive. Or how a woman *your age* manages to keep a house this size all by herself."

She shrugged.

"I wonder why you never age. Mother looks older than you, and before long I'll look older than you."

"Perhaps some things are beyond your grasp," she said. I caught the sound of challenge in her voice.

"Perhaps," I agreed. "But, *when I own Hook House... things will change.*"

She glared at me and fled the room.

Hook House grew even more oppressive, and storm after storm battered the cliff. I was plagued by the nightmare of Sean standing on its crumbling edge.



Sean needed to spend time around other children. I signed him up for preschool in November as a late enrollee. He was excited and spent one afternoon organizing his little school backpack. It was filled with things like round-tipped scissors, crayons, rulers, writing and drawing tablets, and his three favorite books. I left him in the living room with that project and went to check on Mother. It was the nurse's day off.

I found Mother dozing in her electric wheelchair beside the little mosaic table. I lowered myself into the wicker sofa and listened to the outdoor sounds until I nearly fell asleep myself. Things were so very quiet that day—like a lull between storms. Sometimes when the wind was calm like that, I'd hear the sounds of traffic on the blacktop road below the hill. But not that day. That day there was no traffic. I dozed briefly.

I opened my eyes in time to see an owl fly through the yard on silent wings. The day was so hushed I heard the fountain out in the yard, the water trickling from the mouth of the stone fish, even a stray droplet hitting the cobblestones outside the bowl—and over a murmur of phantom pruners clipping the stems of long-dead roses, I heard the soft, steady *tick* of the Grandfather clock at the far end of the hall.

"Mother?" I finally said.



I was relieved Mother had died peacefully in her sleep instead of in pain or hooked to machines—or shoved headfirst down a flight of stairs or suffocated in a trunk. Mother deserved a painless, peaceful end. Surely, I wouldn't see Mother again. Her spirit wouldn't be trapped inside Hook House, wandering its halls.

After the lawyer handled my inheritance, I contacted a Realtor and put Hook House on the market. I could hardly believe what he said it was worth. Who would want to live here? Who in their right mind?

I relished the fact that I could now fire Mrs. Soul, and practiced a short speech. But she didn't respond to the ring of the little bell. There was no sign of her anywhere in the house, in fact, there was no sign that she had *ever* been there. And yet I knew she was there, somewhere. She was above or behind me when I climbed the stairs, watching me from every mirror, through every closed door. She stood at the foot of my bed at night, although I didn't see her.

"I'll find a way to get rid of you," I promised, and knew she heard me.



Sean woke screaming almost every night and was so terrified in his own room I dismantled his bed and brought it downstairs piece by piece, reassembling it in my room. During the night, he tossed and kicked and cried out, and I rose many times to replace his covers. He missed day after day of school. The bus from the Early Days Academy pulled up in front every morning and I waved them away through the window. Two weeks passed with no change in his health.

As always, groceries and supplies arrived on Tuesday mornings at the kitchen door, delivered by a young man who carried boxes into the house and piled them on the counter. He seemed eager to leave, nearly slamming the kitchen door

and leaping into his truck. I unpacked and stowed the supplies myself since Mrs. Soul wasn't around anymore.

One day while I read to Sean on the porch swing, a chickadee flew into one of the windows and fell into the flower bed.

"Oh, Mama!" Sean cried. "Is he hurt?"

"I'll go see." I opened the screen door and discovered that the outside world was *gone*. There was nothing outside except a gray fog, and far below, a sickly light. If I had taken even one step I would have fallen, perhaps forever. I staggered back.

"Mama?"

"It's all right, Sean." I heard the quiver in my own voice. "The bird is okay. He flew away again."

The outside world *was* there—I saw it through closed windows and locked screens, but not through open doors. This was why Mother and Aunt Jessie had never left Hook House after they inherited it. They were its prisoners.

To keep my mind occupied, I went through Mother's things, emptying drawers and closets, packing everything into boxes and marking them for several charities.

Sean dozed in the adjoining room with a blanket and pillow. He seemed so small, so helpless. He needed to be where there were better doctors and better medicine—and no ghosts.

I sat on the vanity stool in Mother's room and it was then I saw Aunt Jessie again. She slept in the bed with her satin comforter pulled up to her shoulders, half asleep, one hand fumbling with the neckline of her gown as if searching for the key.

Mother tiptoed into the room in her soft slippers, a striped cushion from the wicker sofa in her arms. She stood gazing down at Aunt Jessie for a moment, and then she pressed the cushion against Aunt Jessie's face. She leaned down, adding her weight and held the cushion there. Aunt Jessie fought. Her bony arms waved and her hands clawed. She kicked the covers off the bed but she was no match for Mother. After a minute, Aunt Jessie stopped struggling and Mother flung the cushion on the floor and straightened Aunt Jessie's nightgown and bedding. She smoothed her aunt's wavy, silver hair and closed Aunt Jessie's twisted, gaping mouth and eyes. She tucked the comforter under the old woman's arms and placed one dead hand across the stilled breast. Aunt Jessie looked like she had died peacefully in her sleep.

Mother had seen Aunt Jessie suffocate Bernice in the locked trunk. She had seen Aunt Jessie shoot my father as he slept. I suspect every generation has seen the evil history of Hook House played out on that ghostly stage.

After killing Aunt Jessie, Mother never left the house again. The outside world no longer existed through open doors. But now I was a prisoner, too, the same way Mother had been, and Aunt Jessie, and Bernice—all of us—one after another trapped by the house. I owned Hook House. But somehow, it owned me too.

The key on my necklace unlocked the trunk that Aunt Jessie had given away decades ago. Inside that trunk, wherever it was, would be scratches and claw marks from Bernice's struggle to escape. I took the necklace off and dropped it into one of the charity boxes.

Eventually Sean would get well and he would want to go outside. The thought terrified me. If he went outside, I couldn't follow. Something could happen to him out there. My nightmare might come true.



Soon, another thought terrified me. How exactly had Mother died? Every night, my dreams seemed more disturbed and yet more real. In my dreams, I emptied an entire bottle of Mother's medicine into her tea and handed her the cup. In my dreams, I stood beside her, my hand on her shoulder as she finished the tea and then I took the cup and saucer to the kitchen washed it.

In the light of day I convinced myself they were simply dreams, but every morning when I woke, I wondered. Were they dreams, or memories? I doubted my own sanity, and I feared for my son. Had I murdered my own mother? Or was Hook House simply tormenting me?

Frantic, I called Richard.

"Sara?" He sounded very surprised. "How are you?"

"I'm—okay."

"And your mother?"

"She passed away."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Sara. Did she ever tell you that I called?"

"You did?"

"Several times. Once, I even drove down there but the housekeeper threatened to call the sheriff if I didn't leave. She said you refused to see me."

"I never knew. They never told me." My voice sounded strained, even to me.

"Is something wrong, Sara?"

I could barely breathe. "I should have told you, Richard, years ago...you have a son. His name is Sean."

"...a son?"

"Richard, I'm afraid," I whispered. "I think Sean is in danger."

Richard said he was leaving for the coast immediately.

The house was hungry for us. It wanted to devour us. I believed that Mrs. Soul lived within its shadows. Sometimes I thought I heard her in the upstairs hall, or on the stairs.

I packed Sean's things into three suitcases and placed them near the front door, strapping them all to my wheeled luggage tote. In one suitcase, I enclosed his birth certificate, the papers showing his name change, my will, and a note that Sean was to never set foot inside Hook House again, not even after my death when he would inherit all of it.

It was dark when Richard arrived. He hadn't changed much in six years, except he looked even more handsome. He surprised me by throwing his arms around me and holding me tight, and I realized what I had lost by not trusting him.

"Why didn't you tell me about Sean?" he asked.

"Because I was hurt by your silence and I wanted to hurt you by keeping him a secret. And, because I was terribly foolish."

"No, I was the foolish one," he said. "I was prideful and stubborn."

At that moment Sean came into the foyer, dragging his blanket.

Richard's eyes widened. "I understand you've been sick, Sean."

Sean nodded. "Bad dreams."

"We'll go to my house, okay?" Richard said. "There are no bad dreams there."

Sean nodded again. "I'll get my backpack." He ran toward the garden room.

"Is this all your luggage?" Richard asked, noting only three small suitcases.

All of a sudden I started crying and telling Richard everything—babbling about the generations of murder and the ghosts, and how there was no longer a world outside for me. My words spilled out. I sounded incoherent and insane, even to myself.

Sean returned with his backpack and Richard scooped him up and carried him outside. I heard Richard's shoes on the cobblestones outside and Sean's voice, and more than anything else I longed to go with them. I dreaded the thought of never seeing Sean again, dreaded losing Richard a second time. Dreaded staying there alone. I leaned against the wall beside the door, tempted to leap into the fog.

Upstairs, footsteps plodded out of the storage room, along the hallway and then down the stairs. They reached the bottom landing as Richard arrived inside again.

"Come on, Sara." He pointed into the swirling, amber-gray fog. "The outside world is still here. I'm still here." He took my hand and stepped back into that bottomless, swirling mist. I felt his hand, but could not see him.

! ! !

The footsteps were in the living room seconds ago, but now they're in the hallway—running straight toward me. I know it's Mrs. Soul.

Richard is somewhere in that mist, outside the open door. His voice calls to me as if from a great distance. I grip his hand. *Is the world truly out there?* My eyes tell me no.

Talons rake my shoulders like metal hooks. Mrs. Soul is pulling me away from the door. I hear her gurgling breath—like leeches sucked through a straw.

Preferring death, I leap through the door—and fall—the freezing mist stinging my face like needles...but then from under the portico I see the headlights of Richard's car and see Sean in the back seat, waving. The car doors are open and the interior lights are glowing. The night is clear, with stars and a three-quarter moon and my feet are on solid earth. Richard wraps his arm around my shoulder and leads me to the car.

As we circle the fountain and exit the courtyard, every light in the house flashes bright white. Grotesque shadows leap and thrash at every window. We coast down the driveway and all the lights flicker and burn out. The black silhouette of Hook House crouches on the edge of the cliff like a massive pile of coffins.

! ! !

Later that night the cliff collapsed, taking with it the house, the fountains and the fairy garden. I sometimes wonder what it looks like there now, with Hook House gone. But I'll never go back. Let the sea have it. Let the sea wash it all away.





PAULA  
GURAN

## WAVES OF FEAR

IN WHICH THE COLUMNIST goes past feisty and winds up ranting – which is definitely Monteleone’s job here and they don’t call Marano the “Mad Professor” for nothing. She wonders if she, too, has Sicilian blood...



### *Night Visions 11*

William Sheehan, ed.  
Subterranean Press, 2004;  
Hardcover; \$30; 244 pgs.

Dark Harvest originally published nine volumes of the *Night Visions* series, one annually from 1984 through 1991 (with two in 1988). Its mission was, supposedly, to provide a vehicle for the publication of short fiction by both established writers and new talent. Each offered original fiction from three writers, usually in the form of from three to seven short stories. There were a few novellas along the way as well, including then-new-talent Clive Barker’s *The Hellbound Heart* (Volume 3, 1986), George R.R. Martin’s *The Skin Trade* (Volume 5, 1988), Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gardener* and Ray Garton’s *Monsters* (both in #6, 1988), and Thomas Tessier’s *The Dreams of Doctor Ladybank* (Volume 9, 1991).

When Subterranean Press revived the series in 2001, after a decade of non-existence, *NV Volume 10* led with two novellas. Now, *Volume 11* features three very different novellas from three very different writers – Kim Newman, Tim Lebbon, and Lucius Shepard – each born

toward the end of a different decade. All three novellas are well worth reading.

With Newman and Lebbon involved, it also brings the total number of British contributors in the series up to five – the only previous Brits collected being Tanith Lee (in the first, 1984) and Ramsey Campbell and Barker (both in the third, 1986).

The leadoff contribution comes from **Kim Newman**...

Visualize literary and historical figures, both real and fictional, as well as historical events and nonevents as LEGO bricks. Now picture a very strange, very intelligent child building a castle of Gormenghastian complexity and immensity with those bricks. Sometimes he swaps out some LEGOs for others, sometimes he builds entirely new castles but, mostly, he uses the same bricks. He moves the little LEGO people about from one construct to another with logic and an occasional interchange of heads to bodies. The kid builds some fascinating structures, large and small. Over time, you realize they form a whole even greater than the individual parts.

The strange kid is Kim Newman. He and his LEGOs (sometimes he may melt a few, or maybe take a chainsaw to ‘em) have been making up a hell of an imaginative omniverse for over a decade. Although he gets away from the LEGOs entirely at times (as with *Life’s Lottery* and the forthcoming *An English Ghost Story*), plays with a new set or two with Eugene Byrne (the *Where The Bodies Are Buried* stories and the USSA cycle), and dabbles in many other playrooms,

readers are probably most familiar with Newman through his trilogy of “Anno Dracula” novels and stories. (The premise is that Dracula survived Van Helsing, returned to London, married the widowed Queen Victoria, and turned a large percentage of the English population into vampires.) But he’s also used many of the characters and “historic” elements in stories set in an alternative reality in which vampires didn’t take over.

Not that he stops there, Newman is a fount of pop cultural references, literary history, and he never met a Zeitgeist he didn’t inhale. Nor is he afraid to toss in political and sociological implications while maintaining an impeccable “Britishness” about his work. He manages all this while maintaining a high level of intelligence, entertaining and engaging readers on several levels.

Horror, fantasy, science fiction, pulp fiction, experimentation, alternate history, movie mythos, mystery, detection – this man doesn’t mix genres – he’s created one of his own. (Can you say *sui generis*, kiddies?)

You don’t need to know any of that to enjoy his novella “Swellhead” in *Night Vision 11*. It’s all just something I’ve wanted to tell you. Anyway...

Members of the Diogenes Club, in the Newmanian alter-reality of *Swellhead*, are ever-stalwart, super-secret agents who deal with “matters mysterious and malign...protecting the Great British from knowledge deemed likely to send them off their collective nut.” As readers of Sherlock Holmes may (or may not) recall, his brother Mycroft

Holmes was authorized, circa 1880, by Queen Victoria to form the organization and became the first Chair of the Diogenes Cabal. When disbanded one hundred years later by the dastardly Margaret Thatcher, its Chair was Richard Jeperson. In *Swellhead*, Jeperson emerges, somewhat reluctantly but with great conviction of the need, from retirement to combat diabolical evil.

His earliest memories date from 1945, so Jeperson's age can only be estimated, but logic places him over the age of 70 and possibly closer to 80. Age has not withered his mystic Talent nor custom staled his infinity capacity for cerebration—although he occasionally doubts himself. His fab Carnaby Street threads are also intact and he is handily provided a new highly attractive and capable female colleague in Detective Sergeant Stacy Cotterill.

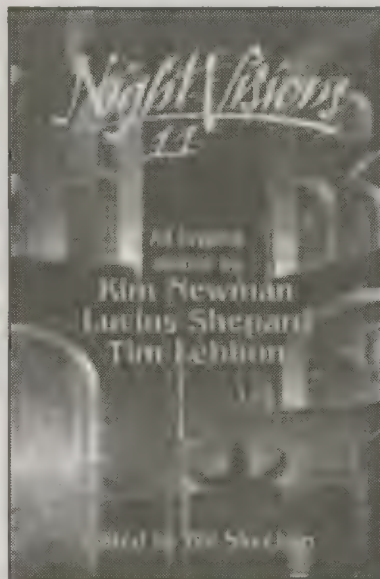
Jeperson, who may be not just a fictional character but a fictional fictional character, was somewhat inspired by Marvel's Dr. Strange, Master of the Mystic Arts, and outrageously camp novelist-detective-spy, Jason King. [Played by Peter Wyngarde on British television 1971-72, King was a hirsute womanizer with terrible teeth and a colorful wardrobe dominated by crushed velvet, frills, and tailor-made double-breasted jackets. (If you think this sounds like Austin Powers, you are right.)] The plot is James Bond amplified to the *n*th degree complete with an underground '60s set-decorated superbase of operations full of white jump-suited minions.

His foe is an evil genius—Sewell Head, or, in malevolent mastermind nomenclature, Swellhead—whose intent is not just to take over the world—but to become reality itself.

There is, of course, a colorful near-invincible henchman (with a hand of tiny whirling blades that can plow through good guy flesh like an inside-out multi-bladed blender) and a kinky henchwoman, Miss Kill, whose martial moves match any in *Crouching Tiger*.

It's thoroughly enjoyable and the very best thing about *Swellhead* is an ending that encourages one to believe that we'll soon be hearing more of Richard Jeperson. Whether this introduces you to Kim Newman or is another injection to feed a growing Newman addiction, *Swellhead* will more than suffice.

**Tim Lebbon's** *In Perpetuity*, *Night Vision's* second novella, is something



completely different.

Lebbon, the youngest of this lot, is one of the better things to happen to horror in the last five years—and in a variety of ways I won't even get into. He is consistently definable as a contemporary horror writer in a literature that is becoming increasingly hard to define. His work, so far, has been a bit uneven, but he seems strongest when working at novella length and is most evocative when he slips into surrealism and enigma. Since he does both here, you're on solid ground.

The horror begins with the heart-stopping terror of losing a child but is quickly replaced with a darkly bizarre mission the child's father must undertake to restore his child. A mysterious and cruel "keeper" has snatched the child and is keeping him in some strange dimension of his curio shop of horrors. He feeds his collection of grotesqueries and wonders by sending men and women out to seek impossibilities in order to set their children free. This father's quest is for the "proof of love" and the keeper grants him access to his "hidden thoughts and the places they lead...pathways that most people cannot or will not see..." in order to find it.

The desperate father quickly learns the world is full of unseen detail and "invisible people looking for miracles." Most of them have wandered for years with little or no success in finding what the keeper has demanded of them; one, the Green Man, has been so maddened by his endless journey that he will do anything to get back to the keeper, including stealing whatever proofs of love the father thinks he's found.

The raw authenticity of the recently widowed father's emotions fuels a story that might otherwise have turned into the sort of exercise in surreal Symbolism that drips with meaning but is bereft of consequence. At the end, you are left with not so much an *idea* of distinct images and scenes but an *impression* of a nightmare from which you have awakened and cannot totally shake. Quiet, but quite effective, horror.

Which leaves the third novella by **Lucius Shepard**...

The eldest of the trio, Shepard's first life as a writer was in the '80s. His debut novel, *Green Eyes* (1984) won the John W. Campbell Award, his 1986 novella "R & R" received a Nebula, and his collections *The Jaguar Hunter* (1987) and *The Ends of the Earth* (1991) won World

Fantasy Awards. Science fiction novella "Barnacle Bill The Spacer" won the 1991 Hugo Award. Numerous *Locus* magazine awards came along, too, as well as nominations too numerous to mention. Then, in 1992, he stopped writing. (Mayhap he was tired out from carrying the weight of all those ugly awards?)

In 1998 he started writing short—really mostly novella-length—fiction again. When *Crocodile Rock* hit *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction's* October 1999 issue, you knew he was back and better than ever. (The International Horror Guild was so happy with *Crocodile Rock* they had to load him up with another award for it.)

*F&SF* celebrated his return in March 2001 with a special section and the publication of *Eternity and Afterward*. His 2002 novella *Over Yonder* (first published online by SCIFI.com's SciFiction) won the Theodore Sturgeon Award. If you hadn't noticed him by then, he made sure you did with novella *Floater* (PS Publishing, 2002) then hit us all upside the head with four novellas published as stand-alones in 2003 alone: *Aztechs* and *Colonel Rutherford's Colt* (both Subterranean), *Louisiana Breakdown* (Golden Gryphon, reviewed in *Cemetery Dance* #45) and *Valentine* (Four Walls Eight Windows).

So, it should come as no surprise that 2004 dawns with another novella, *Hands Up! Who Wants to Die?*, a dark sex and violence and scum of the earth story set in Florida. (As far as contemporary sex and violence and scum of the earth writers, only John Shirley is in Shepard's class and, not surprisingly, both men are survivors of personal periods of low living.) The characters in *Hands Up!* are, characteristically, trapped by circumstances that are, at least partly, of their own devise.

Maceo, an ex-con with an anger management problem, hooks up with Leeli, a hot little cracker honey whose worth to humankind lies only in her being a hot little cracker honey. They're hardly past their first screw, actually in the midst of their second, when they meet up with the mysterious and highly-sexed Ava and her side-hunks Carl and Squire. Ava has plenty of money and a hankering for Leeli and next thing you know the oddball fivesome have parted themselves to one of the armpits of the western hemisphere, Daytona Beach. There are some hints of UFO strangeness and maybe some stuff that strikes one as

peculiar, but as our narrator Maceo puts it, "Pretty much everything strikes me peculiar. So I guess nothin' does."

Like much of Shepard's work, there's not so much of a plot here as a structure. Held together with precisely wrought prose and palpable tension, the structure is built to be toppled. It's a risky writing game and few can play it. Shepard not only plays, he usually wins. This time out, the conclusion is neither weird enough nor rational enough to quite work and Maceo is left to conclude that, well, "shit happens." Still, overall, put another tick mark in Shepard's "winner" column.



Let's get back to another British writer for a bit...

#### *Use Once, Then Destroy*

Conrad Williams  
Night Shade, 2004  
Hardcover; \$27; 250 pgs.

Conrad Williams' style might be summed up as "baroque M. John Harrison"; where Harrison writes with inevitable grace, however, Williams' writing is sometimes a poetic bludgeon to be survived. It's an assault, too, that comes out of a thick obscuring darkness. You can never see exactly what the assailant looks like; can never tell, with any precision, exactly what happens. With a collection like this, you realize he rarely allows the reader the healing power of redemption and his onslaught can leave some nasty scars. But that's the thing about scars—they stay with you. Even after the surface mends, there's sometimes deeper damage that doesn't show. Watch out for Mr. Conrad Williams. In a world of impuissant poseurs who can't prick the thinnest skin when they pick up a pen, he's a sick and dangerous bastard who wields a nasty weapon with his words.



And now a writer who is mad about modern vampires and is not going to take it anymore...

#### *Midnight Mass*

F. Paul Wilson  
Tor, 2004; Hardcover; \$25.95; 336 pgs.

F. Paul Wilson tells us right up front in an author's note that he's had it with the "tortured romantic aesthetes" that pass for vampires these days. *Midnight Mass* is his answer, a return to the "soulless, parasitic creatures we all knew and loved." Welcome to retro-vampirism! Is this the (re-)birth of fangpunk?

Well, yes and no.

The scariest thing about *Midnight Mass* is the premise that the rituals and myths of the (pre-Vatican II) Roman Catholic Church are the One True Way—at least to fight vampires. The second scariest thing is the way Wilson molds entirely unbelievable genre cliché into an entirely entertaining read. With superhuman powers like this, Wilson could rule the world...or at least control the Jersey Shore.

Here's the deal: Vamps have always been among us, but were content to stay in Eastern Europe. With the fall of the Soviet Union, they suddenly decide they want to take advantage of the political disarray and take over the world. Don't ask why. Maybe they wanted new blood. Heheh.

Once they decided to roll, though, they were one hell of a weapon of mass destruction and quickly wiped out the civilization and noncivilization in Eastern Europe, Russia, the Middle East, India, and China (and, we later learn, the Third World as well). Western Europe fell several months before the start of our story. North America, more specifically the U.S. of A., most specifically the eastern seaboard, has succumbed to the onslaught of the undead. The Atlantic Ocean being, we are told, "a natural barrier against the undead."

They've managed all this by first turning a lot of people into vampires and taking advantage of geometric progression. Not that all vampires are alike. There are the ruling elites, the bourgeoisie minions, and the near-mindless, beastly, ravening, recently human masses—ferals—that are used as shock troops. The ferals are let loose on a locale, slaughter and drink their fill, and make sure to rip everyone's heads off. Headless victims die the True Death, which is highly desired since there are enough vampires already. A few humans (mostly local community leaders) are allowed to join the undead whether they want to or not. A few more semi-humans (the kind of folks who weren't really human to start with) are promised eventual promotion to the ranks of the undead

and/or the chance to stand stud at breeding ranches full of childbearing-age poontang to act as "cowboys" and help round-up and contain what's left of the human hold-outs.

The vampires supposedly have all the traditional weaknesses: garlic, no reflections, sunlight, stakes, decapitation, a need for daytime comas, and, most importantly the symbols and rituals of the Catholic Church—crosses, holy water, transubstantiated wine, etc. (They got past the Vatican with "turned" ex-military commanding tanks and heavy artillery. What, no limited nukes?)

In *Midnight Mass*, they arrive in a Jersey Shore town on Good Friday and have the place pretty much under control in less than six weeks. Except for the few good citizens smart enough to have taken precautions and able to defend themselves against the collaborating cowboys who rout them out and round 'em up...and, of course, those destined to be Our Heroes.

There's Orthodox Rabbi Zev Wolpin, who has seen his people—cross-less and incredulous—wiped out. Sister Carole Hanarty is another, a Sister of Mercy turned by the death of her fellow nun, into a wily—if half-mad—vampire killer. (A former high school chemistry teacher, Carole can cook up a batch of plastic explosives in a twinkle.) Zev, at Sister Carole's behest, routs Father Joe Cahill out of drunken oblivion, and the priest—big, strong, Irish-American, handsome, devout, virile (if celibate), charismatic—immediately gives new hope to the stragglers remnants of his former parishioners. They are joined by Lacey, Father Joe's buffly beautiful lesbian atheist niece. Add some colorful supporting characters and, in no time, we are on the way to saving humankind—which, of course, involves love, death, and at least one great car-chase sequence and an assault on the Empire State Building.

Wilson lays it out, über-cinematic scene by scene: good has seldom been so Good, evil has seldom been so Evil and tough, buff lesbian babes have seldom needed to strip naked so often to defeat it. Wilson throws in the kitchen sink and most of the plumbing. The Bad Priest is a pederast-turned-vampire, vampiric haute cuisine is newborn babies, vampires have dumb politics, ineffective bodyguards, dress badly, and, yes, read Anne Rice novels aloud to one another and laugh! Rape, brutality, eviscerations,

stadiums full of bodies, people blown to pieces, vampires blown to pieces, bitch fights...and what possibly may be the single most melodramatic hero-in-the-clutches of the Evil Mastermind as he Explains It All scenes ever written. ("Where's your arrogance now, priest?") Thank goodness...I mean God...there is a Secret that may provide the key to defeat these blood-sucking parasites.

It's not entirely mindless fun. Zev, at first, provides the reader with a reference point. Nu? What's with this cross business? How can this be? Pragmatic the Reb can be, but, oy, are there are Questions here already. Lacey later takes on the role of Doubting Thomasina, so we can buy into the whole scenario to enjoy the ride—even if we do need to stick a plastic Jesus on the dashboard.

So, enjoy already. Don't think so much. *Midnight Mass* is a hell of a lot better than the average genre vampire crap and better than a lot of serious reinterpretation of the vampire mythos crap. Wilson, as he has proven before, can plot his way out of any situation and deliver a pay-off.

After it's all over, you can let your brain cells get back to work. You can start being logical again. Maybe the theological implications and historical questions and the vampiric details about native soil and crossing water and turning to a fog...will all be worked out in the sequel. Or not.



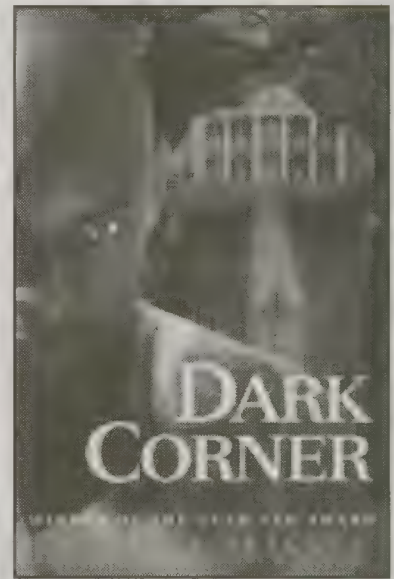
As long as I am dealing with vampires...

#### *Dark Corner*

Brandon Massey  
Dafina/Kensington, 2004  
Trade Paper; \$14; 450 pgs.

*Dark Corner* is a generic vampire novel. Massey is a slick young writer who does as good a job writing as one can do when filling in formula blanks.

Handsome bachelor David Hunter inherits a small fortune from Richard, his bestselling Pulitzer Prize-winning author-father, a man he really never knew. Included in the bequest is a house in the small Mississippi town of Mason's Corner. He packs up his Nissan Pathfinder with some clothes, a couple of computers (he's a webmaster), and his German Shepard named King and leaves Atlanta for Mason's Corner. Maybe, he



thinks, he'll finally be able to discover something about dear old Dad who, though famous, was a bit mysterious. Even Richard's death—he disappeared in a drowning accident and his body was never recovered—is enigmatic.

The town is full of good folks, and it has a dark past personified in a brooding old mansion on a hill. (The place gives you a chill just looking at it.) David meets his neighbors, Ruby and Franklin Bennett, right off. Franklin—David can tell he's trustworthy by his firm handshake—is a wise retired professor who knows all the local lore. Seems locals call the town "Dark Corner" and the creepy mansion belonged to town founder Edwin Mason, an antebellum slave-owning cotton planter. On his first visit to the local park David meets Nia a gorgeous, intelligent, unattached woman, with a Labrador named Princess.

Meanwhile a rich, suave, seductive—but not Byronic—168-year-old vampire Kyle Coiraut leaves his fabulously luxurious French life on a mission. Kyle has learned from Lisha, his indescribably beautiful mother, that his father, Diallo, is not, as he had always thought, dead. Diallo lies, deep in Sleep, entombed in a cave in a, yes, small town in Mississippi. Lisha, the oldest living vampire in the world and Mother to them all, warns Kyle that Diallo is an insatiably violent monster and is better left where he is, but Kyle is determined to dig up his Dad.

Kyle, equipped with civilized vacuum packs of blood (no need for human victims these days, just poke in a straw), moves into the sinister old

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mansion and causes some talk. David gets to know Nia. We get to know more of the townsfolk: Police Chief Van Jackson's who is having a little trouble with his teen-aged son; Junior, the slow but nice odd-jobber; Vicky Queen, a high class hooker with a heart of gold; the psychic Pearl; the insightful Reverend Brown...

Diallo, thanks to Kyle, awakens and proves to be a teensy bit less civilized than his son. He does rude things like suck humans dry and kill them, create vampire dogs, make a lot of heavy warrior talk, and, soon enough, creates an army of low-level vampires so he can take over the world. Diallo gives meaning to Kyle's life, uh, make that undead: Why be a namby-pamby mama's vampire when you can be strong and potent like Dad?

Weird things are happening. It's apparent that David's legacy involves a lot more than a house and a few million bucks. He has been brought to Dark Corner for a Purpose. David's grandpa, 20 years dead, appears to him with a message. A strange raven shows up. Clues begin to emerge, portents appear, chills skip along, rattle down, and slice like lances of ice into various spines. People start getting turned into vampires. Good people that we liked. Bad things happen...

If you consider this "horror" then Brandon Massey's done his job. Read the book and have a fine time. But stop

bothering to read this column because our definitions will never coincide.

'Cause this ain't horror for me.

To his credit, Massey writes well enough that I could keep reading the book. I already knew the characters, the situation, the outcome. The "twist" at the end was telegraphed early on. The only thing "different" about *Dark Corner* is that the characters are black and the town is predominately African-American, but not much is made of it. There's a superficial link between the horrors of slavery and horror, period. There's a mild infusion of black culture. None of that changes the plot elements mentioned above and none of it makes much difference in the characters. (If playing the "casting game," I'd have Morgan Freeman as Franklin Bennett even if this were a small town in Maine.) Maybe there's an intended message about men (and vampires) who grow up without fathers, but if so, it backfires—and it is obvious that Massey is too intelligent for that.

Because of the author's intelligence and his fundamental ability to write, *Dark Corners* is better than many of the formulaic novels of 20 years back when genre horror was having its heyday and a lot of people were trying to be Stephen King. And, face it, whether white people are comfortable admitting it or not—there's more than a chance that, due to overt or unconscious racism, Massey would have had trouble being "allowed" into the genre club 20 years

ago anyway. (Arguably, in the early '80s, there weren't many women admitted to that club either.)

But race isn't an issue here except to the extent that publishers have belatedly realized that black folks (and Latino folks and gay folks and...) buy books and have started ethnic marketing efforts. (*Dark Corner* is part of Kensington's Dafina imprint.)

Brandon Massey, like a lot of other writers today, grew up in a world full of imitations of imitations of Stephen King. They may even have fallen in love with horror reading King himself. Some of them learned the lessons King taught well and—because they are, first and foremost writers, not imitators—they write some damned good horror. Too many others, unfortunately, didn't learn enough from King (or about writing or horror) and are now imitating the imitators of imitators.

Stephen King was writing his only vampire novel around the time Brandon Massey was born in 1973. King was learning the mechanics needed to build his novels when he wrote *Salem's Lot* (published in 1975, two years after his debut *Carrie* came out). In fact, he used a lot of what became his trademark techniques for the first time in *Salem's Lot*. King used a lot of subplots, for instance, that intersect each other to build suspense while steadily advancing his main story then ties it all up at the end. The residents of *Salem's Lot* embody the good, the bad, and the in-between

and King shows the stresses and strains of that mix an isolated community. Small things inexorably escalate into evil. Eventually, of course, people must band together to defeat that evil, but that band is not exactly made up of purely "good people."

Few, if any, writers have ever shown the awareness and appreciation—the sheer love—King has for horror's literary traditions. He wrote *'Salem's Lot*, as a form of "literary homage" to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* as well as a paean to the vampire stories in E.C. comics of the 1950s. He updated the archetype and made it fresh again. That, of course, isn't all that made him the phenomena he later became.

Books have been written about all this and I have nothing new to add, so I'll just sum up a part of the standard theory to refresh your memory. Along with a genius for making us cozy in his deceptively ordinary world, King weaves a subtext of his post-World War 2 generational fears into his stories. This lends an underlying realism that helps connect the reader with his or her personal emotion of fear. More than anything else (and I'm probably quoting somebody here) King uses horror to examine fundamental human drama.

In other words, it's not the vampires that are scary. For King himself, it was the empty town during the daylight hours that was the most frightening. The "things in closets," people under beds and under the concrete pilings of trail-

ers. He wrote the novel in 1973 during the Watergate hearings, and, as he has said, "Howard Baker kept asking, 'What I want to know is, what did you know and when did you know it?' That line haunts me, it stays in my mind.... I was thinking about secrets, things that have been hidden and were being dragged out into the light."

Another of the underlying horrors of *'Salem's Lot* was its disconnected populace. Even before they start hiding from sunlight, they and their town were dead. Constable Gillespie even says, at one point, the town "ain't alive. That's why *he* came here. It's dead, like him... They prob'ly like bein' vampires." (The undead bringing undeath to those living but dead. There's some irony for you.)

Even back in 1973, you couldn't just set up a small town, imagine some characters, bring in a vampire and a hero and have a good novel. You couldn't write small scenes introducing people that don't always advance the whole. You couldn't take the tensions of a small town and do anything with them if the small town is full of pleasant folks with a lot in common and no tensions. Nor could you have a good horror novel without some real emotion at its core.

And in 2004? Stephen King would not even write *'Salem's Lot* the same way.

Why have I taken up all this space ranting about Mr. Massey's book and Kingian horror? Because I see enough in *Dark Corner* to suspect that, like Stephen

King, Massey really does love this stuff. I think he may have the ability to understand that horror is an emotion and not a *kind* of fiction, but he needs to learn his craft, find out what disturbs him (other than know-it-all reviewers), and write a novel for the 21st century.

And I doubt that anyone else will say it.

---

"Waves of fear, attack in the night  
Waves of revulsion, sickening sights  
My heart's nearly bursting, my chest's  
choking tight  
Waves of fear, waves of fear"

-Lou Reed, "Waves Of Fear"  
from *The Blue Mask* (1982)

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PAULA GURAN is working on her **Comprehensive Special and General Theory of Modern Horror**. It's not going so well. Maybe it's made her grumpy. See if this perverse irritability is showing up on [www.darkecho.com](http://www.darkecho.com). Email her via [darkecho@darkecho.com](mailto:darkecho@darkecho.com).



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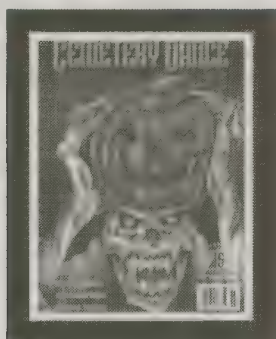
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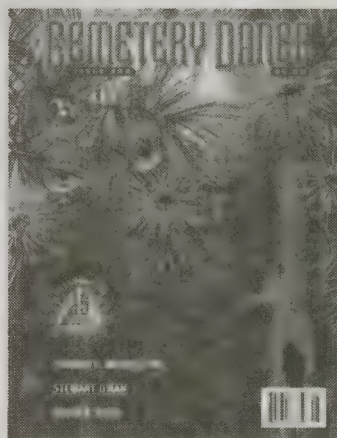
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# MICHAEL MARANO

## MEDIADROME

I'VE BEEN WAITING thirty years for this. Now that it's here, I almost don't know what to do or feel. But yeah, it's been three decades since I first picked up Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Thirty years since I first tranced into those maps of Middle-earth, utterly convinced that Professor Tolkien had found a secret cache of manuscripts and was letting me in on some hidden history of the world; to my nine-year-old mind this made sense, 'cuz he was, like...some kind of genius professor over in England, somewhere. Thirty years since Tolkien first changed my worldview so that, in my utterly mundane reality of growing up in Buffalo, NY, I couldn't walk through the park and see a vine-covered statue or bit of masonry and not think of lost kingdoms. In my head, I imagined a *Lord of the Rings* adaptation with the dark flavor of a Hammer movie (even as a kid, I was a berserk fan of horror movies), and I thought how cool it would've been to have Peter Cushing as Gandalf and Christopher Lee as Saruman. Well, after all this time, to have even one person from your ideal cast in the movie you dreamed about is pretty freakin' tremendous. But wow...RETURN OF THE KING has finally arrived.

It's worth the thirty years' wait.

FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING choked me up for a number of reasons. A friend of mine who's an internationally respected expert on fantasy fiction confessed to me that she cried during those opening shots of the Shire in FELLOWSHIP. I'm not ashamed to admit that I had a brick-sized lump in my throat. I was in awe of the love that director Peter Jackson and his co-screenwriters Fran Walsh and

Philippa Boyens had for material that I love, too. I was moved in the way that I am when I see a musician perform a piece he or she loves. And Mike, "Mr. Hot-Shot-Professional-Movie-Critic", melted right down to drooling Fan-Boy; I saw FELLOWSHIP many times in the theater. I liked THE TWO TOWERS, but a lot of the FELLOWSHIP magic wasn't there for me. TOWERS was too stuffed with action to allow Jackson and Co.'s love of Tolkien to shine through; though that was fixed, I thought, in Jackson's magnificent DVD "Extended Edition" of TOWERS.

RETURN OF THE KING is dense with action and love for Tolkien. Jackson said that RETURN OF THE KING's climactic Battle of the Pelennor Fields would make THE TWO TOWERS' Battle of Helm's Deep seem like a skirmish. That worried me, because the endless Helm's Deep scenes in the theatrical cut of THE TWO TOWERS drowned out the emotional impact of the film. Well, RETURN OF THE KING's Battle of the Pelennor Fields is thicker with emotion than it is swordplay. It's exciting. It's full of spectacle and awe. And it's full of melancholy and sadness and hope and desperation. Just like Tolkien's novel. There's a sense of loss to the action, the feeling that, no matter what the outcome of this vast War, an Age is withering. That sense of loss eclipses any technical innovation Jackson brings to the movie. Hell, it is the movie, in a lot of ways. The film begins with a loss that is terrifying and touching; an almost Biblical Fall. The conflict behind that Fall flavors the whole movie; it echoes through the narrative. KING has moments of doom and terror, but the doom and terror on a grand scale

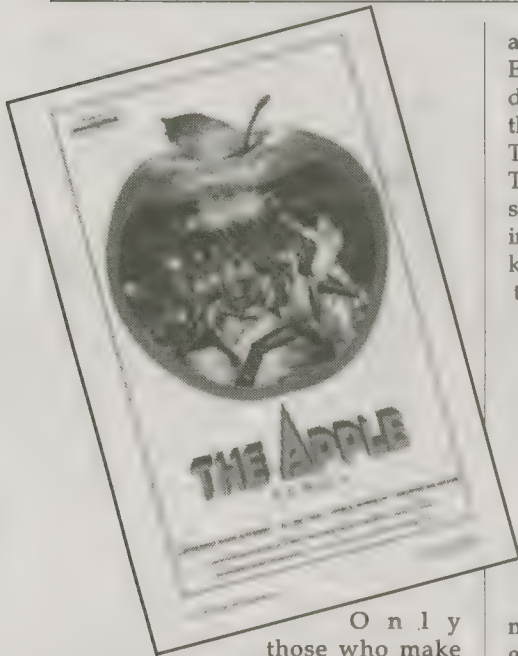
are defined by the loss embodied in the smaller, quieter scenes.

Jackson and Walsh and Boyens aren't slaves to the source material. There are changes to Tolkien's plot, but they are changes that seem made to increase the tension of certain moments. I don't think all of them work, but they are valid changes, and don't seem arbitrary. Also, KING has many endings, as any story of this length and complexity should; how many endings does David Lean's DOCTOR ZHIVAGO have, and that puppy is one-third the length of Jackson's trilogy? Not all the endings work, and more than one of them are groaners. As has been widely reported, Jackson had to cut a number of plot points that he filmed (some major), and as a result, quite a bit of the movie feels abrupt and choppy. In certain scenes, characters bear wounds, both emotional and physical, the infliction of which is not depicted. Loose ends dangle.

But these are ultimately quibbles—faults I'm sure Jackson will fix in his Extended DVD Edition. Fans who have not waited thirty years for this, but only the three years since those first trailers hit, will probably be as apoplectically overjoyed as was this fanatical Tolkien dork for RETURN OF THE KING.

! ! !

1980's THE APPLE, directed by Menahem Golan, is just as bad and as brilliant as Ed Wood's PLAN 9. I feel weird writing this review and letting the CD readership know about THE APPLE, because on some level, I want this movie to stay obscure.



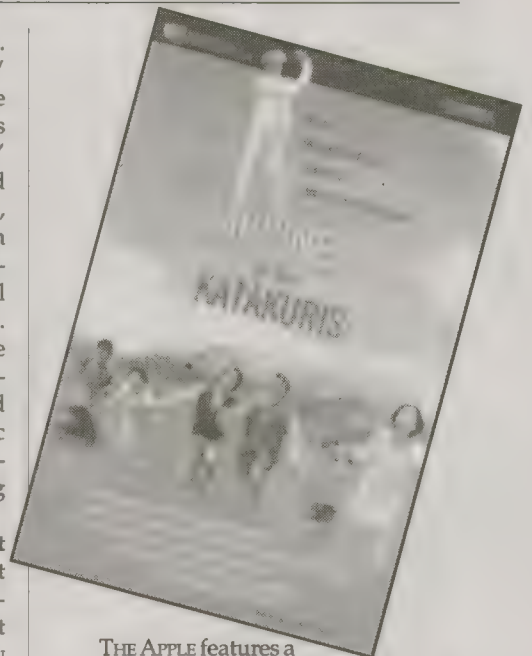
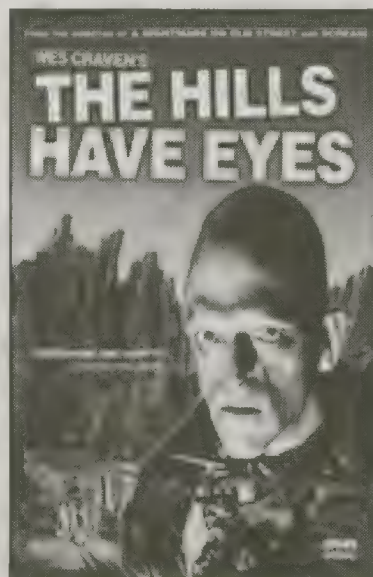
Only those who make the effort to see *THE APPLE*—on bootleg video, on cable late at night, or by getting malaria and hallucinating the movie—are worthy of seeing it. But I hear tell that it recently played the Nuart Theater in LA, and that it's shown up semi-regularly on some of the more low-rent Showtime channels. I also hear (from not very reliable sources) that MGM might be cooking a DVD release. I recently saw *THE APPLE* at a Bad Movie Festival in Charleston, SC. My fellow Buffalo, NY homeboy, Peter Paolini, organized the festival. He turned me on to this movie, and I'm really mad at him for letting me know about a flick that now eats at my poor little brain the way a maggot does the rotting flesh of an...uhhhmmmm...apple.

How bad is *THE APPLE*?

The thoughts "What the HELL am I watching?!" and "What the HELL were they thinking?!" rattle through your noggin as you scrape your retinas raw watching *THE APPLE*. In the "future" of 1994—in which important people zip around in sci-fi limos that look like station wagons worked over by the *Dr. Who* art department, and business men wear sparkly suits that would make Gary Glitter blush—heartless corporations have ripped the soul out of music. (Oh, really? How could that ever happen?) Enter two swell kids from Moosejaw, Canada, who strike a Faustian deal with the evil music promoter, Mr. Boogaloo, who comes across as a collision of Ziggy Stardust and the demon from *THE EXORCIST*. The swell kids' names are Alphonse and Bibi. Get it? It's an Adam and Eve parable,

and they're the Alpha and the Beta. Every two minutes come groovy, glam/disco/new wave numbers that inspire the same dropped-jaw reaction as does *THE PRODUCERS*' "Springtime for Hitler." There's a pretty great Bosch-inspired set piece with demons and serpents, in which a dime store Peter Frampton knock-off with the muscle-tone of something with "Schmucker's" on the label prances around in a fig leaf jock strap. Mr. Boogaloo's evil control of the music industry translates into political power. Friends, you haven't lived until you've seen fascist, futuristic disco riot police doing calisthenics to Mr. Boogaloo's toe-tapping totalitarian tunes.

Truly, bad movies—by that I mean epic bad movies that change your life—must have glimmers of quality. Example? There's that genuinely well-done moment in *PLAN 9* when Tor Johnson rises from the grave. Really bad movies are sort of a shamanistic experience, like something out of *A MAN CALLED HORSE*; you endure unbearable pain for instants of ecstatic revelation. *THE APPLE*, for all its ridiculous faults, makes quite a few valid points about corporate control of the arts. In this era of *American Idol*, *THE APPLE* seems remarkably prescient. And by golly, one of the songs is pretty good. And out of a clear blue sky comes a really good performance by Miriam Margolyes (you might know her as Professor Sprout in the *HARRY POTTER* movies) as Alphonse's landlady. But these glimmers just throw the soul-enriching wretchedness of *THE APPLE* into higher relief.



*THE APPLE* features a climax involving a lost tribe of chanting hippies right out of the last Quatermass serial and an extra special "Guest Star" who arrives in a glowing, cosmic pimp-mobile. *THAT FLYS!*

Padawan, you must earn the right to see *THE APPLE*! No mere mortal movie fan can endure it! Seek out this grail of all bad movies. Get on line. Find bootlegs. Set your Tivo's. Go on a quest for *THE APPLE*!



Speaking of musicals, 2001's *THE HAPPINESS OF THE KATAKURIS* (AKA, *KATAKURI-KE NO KOFUKU*), recently out on DVD in North America, is one of my favorite films of the past five years. The flick, directed by Takashi Miike, the guy who brought you *AUDITION*, is a claymation/horror/musical/comedy/family drama/Technicolor parody of *THE SOUND OF MUSIC* and *AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN*. Read that last sentence again. Say it out loud. Delicious, no? I laughed so hard watching the *Katakuris*, I thought I'd popped a lung. The film opens, for no damned good reason besides being its being hellaciously funny, with a roll of Gummy-like psychosis that looks and feels like Francis Bacon via the California Raisins. It's only after we're completely lost in the demented cartoon vision of director Miike, with its demon-possessed soup, razor-clawed teddy bears and uvula-loving imps, that we meet the live-action *Katakuri* family. The *Katakuris* have forsaken the hustle and bustle of the big city and moved to the foot of Mount

Fuji to open a Bed and Breakfast. That Mount Fuji is photographed in a way that hints Julie Andrews should be dervishing in the next field doesn't register with the poor Katakuris, who are ulcer-worried their dream venture might go belly up. But wait! A depressed customer comes up the mountain. Things are looking up...but then, "The Hills Are Alive with the Sound Of Screaming", to pinch a line from the movie poster. The Hills are also then alive with intentionally campy '80s MTV-style numbers that'd shame the members of Whitesnake.

HAPPINESS is sort of a companion piece to Baz Luhrmann's MOULIN ROUGE. Both movies have a love of musicals that allow them to vivisect those kitschy old flicks with a kind of reverence, though unlike Luhrmann's, Miike's love is kind of snide. The same kind of love for romances lets Miike set his "second chance," Gere/Winger-flavored love story sub-plot atop a mountain of garbage next to a bubbling toxic lake, complete with lovers lifted from the ground by their passion while they belt out show-stoppers and the air churns with flying trash. Yeah, there's violence and mayhem, but these are the scenes Miike chooses to film in claymation, so's to not really upset anybody. That the dead bodies get up and sing and dance shows that they're really not holding any grudges in the afterlife. HAPPINESS OF THE KATAKURIS is a demented, Tourettic masterpiece that proves dead bodies, Technicolor rainbows, and dance routines go together beautifully.

! ! !

I hope it's not just because I grew up in the '70s, because I think nostalgia is one of the sickest blights of Western Civilization, but damn...the horror movies of the '70s were golden, weren't they? It really felt like the world was falling apart in those flicks. Compare 2003's THE ORDER to THE OMEN. THE OMEN really felt apocalyptic. THE ORDER was melodramatic drivel that had no true Apocalyptic Mojo. Think of THE EXORCIST, DAWN OF THE DEAD, ALIEN, the real TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE, STRAW DOGS. In a time when a mainstream studio could show you Christopher Walken in THE DEER HUNTER blowing his own head off courtesy of a Dick Smith special effect and snag a Best Picture Oscar, Horror movies had to really play nasty.

Which brings me to the new Anchor Bay 2-disc DVD release of Wes Craven's 1977 masterpiece, THE HILLS HAVE EYES. Is THE HILLS HAVE EYES a good movie, in and of itself? Well, maybe not. It's full of bad plotting and sloppy character development. But the shortcomings of THE HILLS HAVE EYES are eclipsed by its unbelievably sincere viciousness. This movie is a happy postcard of malignancy from the era that brought you Patty Hearst, Squeaky Fromme, Cambodia, and the Fall of Saigon. THE HILLS HAVE EYES is a vile movie. And that's a good thing.

The flick, as I'm sure you guys know, concerns a Wonderbread family out in the desert, confronting a family of mutant cannibals. That's kinda beautiful, huh? Suburbanites against the savages. Wes Craven's sadistically accurate insight points out that there's not much difference between the suburbanites and the cannibals. THE HILLS HAVE EYES is still, after all these years, one of the meanest social commentaries ever filmed, and that makes it a great horror flick of the '70s, or any decade. The new Anchor Bay DVD transfer is pretty bitchin'. I never saw the movie look so good, even when I saw it in the theaters.

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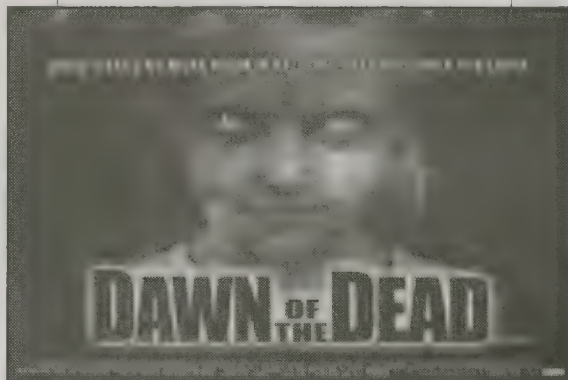
Most film trilogies never live up to their potential. THE MATRIX TRILOGY went fizz, albeit on film number two; number three was pretty good. STAR WARS died in a flurry of Ewok fur. GODFATHER III. BACK TO THE FUTURE. To a certain extent, this is true with George Romero's DEAD Trilogy, begun with 1968's NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD, continuing with 1979's DAWN OF THE DEAD, and ending with 1985's DAY OF THE DEAD. I was never crazy about DAY OF THE DEAD, and I only saw it once since it first came out in 1985. I just got hold of the Anchor Bay 2 disc DIVIMAX DVD release of DAY OF THE DEAD, and saw the

movie again for the first time in almost 20 years. With the distance of two decades, I can see DAY's merits in a way I never could before. The social satire at the heart of the first two DEAD movies had always seemed diluted to me in DAY OF THE DEAD. DAY OF THE DEAD, set in an underground Army bunker, was so obvious a bashing of boot-stomping Reagan-era militarism, the satire felt weakened; the flick came out the same year as RAMBO, fer chissakes. But hey, two Gulf Wars later, this satire doesn't seem too over-the-top, anymore. I thought Joe Pilato's take on the maniacal Captain Rhodes was jarring and unbelievable on first viewing. In his gung-ho extremes, Pilato's Rhodes becomes on second viewing a much more sly figure of hyperbole than he seemed at first, a character with much more in common with Conrad's Mr. Kurtz than anybody actually enlisted in the armed forces. The claustrophobia of the bunker, the coldness and lack of light, give Romero the chance to create a nasty mood that tastes like coughed up tuberculosis spores. In a lot of ways, the zombies are the healthiest beings in the movie. The varying degrees of mental illness of each character are deeply unnerving in their implications as to how people really do work together in close quarters under great stress.

At the un-beating heart of the movie is the delicious and multi-layered relationship between Dr. Logan and his zombie pal, Bub. Logan (brilliantly played by the late Richard Liberty), a man not-so-affectionately known as "Dr. Frankenstein" with the bearing of a blood-splattered penguin on crystal meth, has an approach to the zombie plague that's a not-so-subtle blend of B.F. Skinner and Goya. Working in a lab that looks like a low-rent charnel house, Logan believes the zombies can be socialized with treats and positive reinforcement. In this daffy context, Logan and Bub become metaphoric stand-ins who savage how we all have been socialized. Pretty deliciously subversive.

The new Anchor Bay release features a bonus commentary track from filmmaker Roger Avary, Oscar-winner for PULP FICTION, and writer/director of KILLING ZOE. Avary's comments are those of a blotto, berserk Fan-Boy, and it's a joy to hear a guy who truly loves movies spout rapturously about one of his favorite flicks.

Is DAY OF THE DEAD in the same league as NIGHT and DAWN OF THE



DEAD? Nope. Is it a great horror movie with Romero's trademark flourishes and special gore effects by Tom Savini that have never been topped? Yep. Was I a stupid putz know-it-all for writing off DAY OF THE DEAD in '85? Yep. The flick is a classic, and I wish I'd figured that out a long time ago. Please, God...let Romero get funding for the fourth DEAD movie he's cooking, DEAD RECKONING.

[Contractually obliged notice: portions of the above review appeared in very different form on the *Science Fiction Weekly* website.]



Near as I can figure, writer/director Patty Jenkins' debut feature, MONSTER, based on the life of Florida '80s/early '90s highway killer Aileen Wuornos, diverges from the facts of the Wuornos case enough to be considered fiction. Discard the authority of the ominous phrase "Based on a True Story," which that TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE remake used to reel in teeny-boppers last Fall. You don't need it. MONSTER has elements in common with the Aileen Wuornos case, but it is not true. Which is fine. Because while MONSTER is not true, it does tell the Truth.

Once upon a time, movies used to acknowledge losers and anti-heroes, and this was part of a larger mission to tell the Truth. Could any leading man today who has the kind of stature Paul Newman had in the mid-'60s think of doing COOL HAND LUKE? Ditto, an actor of Steve McQueen's stature doing BULLIT? Were anyone to make IN COLD BLOOD as a feature today, the boys on the run would have to be handsome, loveable and innocent, wouldn't they? "Road picture" more readily means Brittney Spears in CROSSROADS than it does EASY RIDER. From the '80s on, the liver-kicking Truth of movies withered in favor of Reagan-era kitsch. Everyone had to be pretty. Everyone had to be easily likeable. "Family drama" no longer meant THE GODFATHER; it meant TERMS OF ENDEARMENT. "Anti-hero" no longer meant Bruce Dern reaching for a cigarette and rasping "Gimmie a hit off something straight!" as he lay dying; it meant Tom Cruise mugging through TOP GUN. "Hard-hitting" stories like THE FRENCH CONNECTION became drivel like Hill Street Blues and 48 HOURS. To me, the era of '80s kitsch began the summer of '82. That was the cultural moment when John Carpenter's brilliant THE THING, a flick with an ambiguous, downbeat

ending featuring a cadre of unshaven, smelly anti-heroes thanklessly throwing away their lives to save the world from an alien tanked, but the cuddly-wuddly suburban jerk-off fantasy of ET became a cultural juggernaut. Just think of the ass-kicking end of 1980's EMPIRE STRIKES BACK. Now think of the teddy bear-infested tripe of '83's RETURN OF THE JEDI.

I bring this up to contextualize MONSTER as a parable, a not-so-True-story that tells an old-style cinematic Truth. That MONSTER features '60s anti-hero icons Bruce Dern and Scott Wilson speaks volumes. The eponymous "monster" may be Aileen. It may be the name of a carnival ride that terrified her as a child. But the most malignant, evil monster in this movie is loneliness. And just as surely as Frankenstein's Monster had its origin in the lab, so does the Loneliness Monster of this film have its origin in the abandonment and cultural invisibility of the loser that '80s kitsch embodied. Aileen Wuornos, the person, was a wretched killer. MONSTER's Aileen Wuornos, the parable, is human garbage discarded by the '80s and early '90s, her isolation and worthlessness defined by the times. She is a whore of the PRETTY WOMAN-era whose johns were not billionaire Richard Gere, but drunk guys who beat her up and tried to kill her. Wuornos wanders the fringes of an '80s society that has no use for her. The Loneliness Monster whelps her as one of its own. The psychological and physical violence of MONSTER is scarier than what you'll see in most overt horror movies. The violence of Loneliness in MONSTER, however, is a thing of deep, icicle-through-the-heart terror.

Charlize Theron as Aileen Wuornos is, simply, a revelation. I'd never before seen her in a movie that required her to act. Her eyes hold a wounded desperation like that of a gut-shot deer. And she can turn that wounded desperation to viciousness with a tilt of her head. It's astonishing. Christina Ricci, in a just world, would've gotten a Best Supporting Actress Oscar as Wuornos' girlfriend Selby, who, like Aileen, is '80s flotsam—a member of the acid-washed Diaspora.

One of the dangers of films that hand you likeable, pretty characters is that they whither empathy. Compassion is like a muscle; if you don't strain it, it atrophies. MONSTER, a movie set in an era of necrotic compassion, when the brutality of homelessness got candy-coated into the fairy-tale bullshit of CBS's *Beauty and The Beast*, features a homeless

protagonist whose brutality is repugnant. Writer/director Jenkins forces us to feel compassion for Aileen Wuornos. MONSTER is a film that hurts, and that hurt comes from using the long-dormant faculty of compassion that had once been the Truth of a cinema that the '80s had no further use for...just like it had no use for Aileen. See MONSTER, and remind yourself of what movies and hard-won compassion used to be like.



A pretty weird and disturbing flick, Shunji Iwai's ALL ABOUT LILY CHOU-CHOU (2001, AKA RIRI SHUSHU NO SUBETE) has been making the rounds of North American film festivals. It's a borderline horror flick about teen de-humanization. Kitschy Japanese pop and cyber-culture is cracked like an oyster shell; the kids who hide behind Japanese pop culture are revealed not to be the drone "Salary Men" in training business journals would have you believe.

To worm into the heads of modern Japanese teens, writer/director Iwai reportedly invented a fake pop star named Lily Chou-Chou, a sort of "Asian Bjork", and then created websites devoted to her (a Lily Chou-Chou song can be heard on the KILL BILL soundtrack). Real kids logged on to these Internet shrines to this make-believe pop star, filling its chatrooms with digital angst. Then, Shunji Iwai pulled a BLAIR WITCH, and informed the real-life fans of this fake pop star about the fictional murder of a Lily Chou-Chou fan; this murder that never happened, and the kids' reactions to the murder, cornerstoned the novel he'd write and the movie he'd make.

This set-up sounds like that Pacino movie SIMONE, about the computer-generated movie star, with a dash of William Gibson. But ALL ABOUT LILY CHOU-CHOU isn't a cyberpunk embracing of "jacking into the matrix." It's about how hollow cyber-pop culture can make us, if it eclipses all else. The movie is peppered with the typed chatroom texts of Lily's fans, and while this seems digital/psychic noise, it backbones a major subplot. Who are these kids in the chatroom, who go by names like "Phillia," "Bear," and "Blue Cat"? The revelations, or even the suspicions, of who these chatroom avatars really are in the flesh provides much of the movie's throat-kicking emotional pay-off.

ALL ABOUT LILY CHOU-CHOU owes less to trendy cyber-writings than it does to

movies like Larry Clark's *KIDS*, Harmony Korine's *GUMMO* and Michael Cuesta's *L.I.E.* The movie's structure is confusing at first. Plot points are addressed after they have happened off-camera. Characters change dramatically from one scene to the next, with no explanation given until much later in the film. It's all bewildering. But so's adolescence.

The plot centers on a Lily fan named Yûichi (Hayato Ichihara), who must deal with, among other things, a bully named Hoshino (Shûgo Oshinari). But no lunch-money stealing thug is Hoshino; he's more complex than that. He's not that bad, it seems. Then it seems he's much worse. Hoshino has three near encounters with death, and learns exactly the wrong lessons from those encounters, making life miserable for Yûichi, and everyone Yûichi knows (in the flesh, and in cyberspace).

At two hours and twenty minutes, with its broken narrative structure and jerky digital cinematography, *LILY CHOU-CHOU* can be hard going. But if you stick with it, if you *allow* yourself to be confused until the threads come together, *ALL ABOUT LILY CHOU-CHOU* will give you a series of dramatic payoffs, each one better than the single dramatic payoffs most movies stingily parcel out.



There's a problem critics face when they see ultra-low budget movies made by young filmmakers. The critic has to ask, "Is this a good movie or a bad movie in and of itself? Am I liking or disliking it because I'm aware of the efforts of the director in a way I'd never be if I were watching some Hollywood piece of shit at the multi-plex?" These movies are handcrafted. Most mainstream movies are product. I'll forbear to name specific titles, but more often than not with these handcrafted movies, I find myself far more engaged by the obvious plights of the guerilla filmmakers than I am with the characters in their films.

On the other hand, Geneviève Jolliffe's 1998 masterpiece *URBAN GHOST STORY* is one of the best Horror movies of the past twenty years, and it's only played a few film festivals, to my knowledge. I'm hoping the fact that it features Billy Boyd, Pippin himself, in a small part will lead to it getting proper DVD/VHS release. But, as cute little Billy doesn't play a troublemaking Hobbit, but a stuttering loan shark who gets off bullying desperate women, this might

be a vain hope. I'm pretty certain an awful lot of people who hated *THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT* really just kinda hated Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, for pulling it off. Darren Aronofsky's *PI* kicks ass as a movie in and of itself, even though it does gain a little something on subsequent viewings once you know that Aronofsky, filming without permits, had to post scouts in case the cops showed up.

Which brings me to another Horror flick filmed on a wing and prayer around 1998—J.T. Petty's *SOFT FOR DIGGING*. The flick was shot in two weeks, while Petty was a film student in his early twenties, and reportedly cost just \$6000.00. It's hit the film festival circuit, including Sundance and The Boston Independent Film Festival. The makers of *REDNECK ZOMBIES* probably had more professional grade resources at their disposal than did Petty.

*SOFT FOR DIGGING* is an almost dialogue-free flick (I think there are three or four spoken lines) about a lonely old man named Virgil who witnesses something awful while looking for his cat, who has run off into the woods. The flick is done with the same kind of Jacques Tati/Buster Keaton in Hell deadpan that made *ERASERHEAD* so memorable. But, is it a good movie? Or is it yet another work by a student filmmaker that revels in its own cleverness?

*SOFT FOR DIGGING* truly is a good movie in and of itself. It's not an annoyingly clever film. Petty's use of so little dialogue is not a stunt, like a kid riding his bike blindfolded. I can only think of Petty's use of so little dialogue as being like other directors' use of negative space, in which you highlight what you want to define by the emptiness around it. Petty seems to define things by the wordlessness around them. Again, this isn't a stunt. *SOFT FOR DIGGING* is a Horror movie about absence, the absence of loneliness and an awful kind of spiritual absence. Wordlessness is the best and most evocative way for him to articulate this emptiness.

And by "wordless", I don't mean that *SOFT FOR DIGGING* is a silent movie wannabe. Without dialogue, Petty moves his plot forward with other tools, like incredible sound and pretty inventive editing. In fact, you could argue that he uses sound and editing *as* narrative in a way that few directors could ever pull off. Like David Lynch's *ERASERHEAD*, *SOFT FOR DIGGING* maintains moods by way of exaggerated sound effects and

lingering, matter-of-fact shots. Virgil's kitty purrs so loudly as to be a Greek chorus throughout much of the film, and Petty's camera takes a meandering kind of kitty POV in these scenes. A scene in which Virgil talks to a couple of cops, what in other narratives would require the dull rattling on that is the backbone of those crummy *Law and Order* shows, is framed so that it is a tableau dominated by...Virgil's coffee percolator, the industrial strength bubbling and gurgling of which drowns out what the three men are saying, thus demonstrating that you don't need dumb *Law and Order* style dialogue to move a plot forward (while at the same time maintaining a lonely, sad feeling).

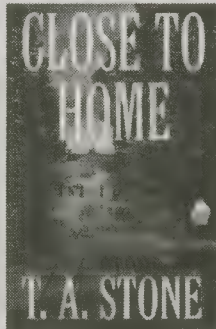
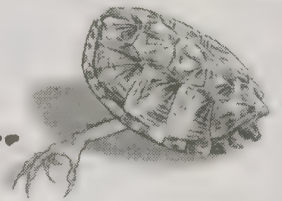
*SOFT FOR DIGGING* is a movie about a kind of haunting. The film is itself haunting; pieces of it click into place long after you've seen it. This is the place in a review of this kind of movie where I'm supposed to say, "I'm looking forward to more work from the talented Mr. Petty." That's only half true. Since *SOFT FOR DIGGING*, Petty has made the direct-to-video *MIMIC 3*, which I have yet to see. Instead, I'll say, "I'm looking forward to more work from the talented Mr. Petty that is the product of his own distinct and innovative vision." Get more info at [www.softfordigging.com](http://www.softfordigging.com). Look for it on the festival circuit.

**Aging, bald punk rocker and Horror writer MICHAEL MARANO's mid-life crisis has officially begun; his doctor told him he has to give up coffee, and his optometrist says he'll probably need bifocals soon.** [www.mindspring.com/~profmike/](http://www.mindspring.com/~profmike/) [dawnsong@mindspring.com](mailto:dawnsong@mindspring.com)



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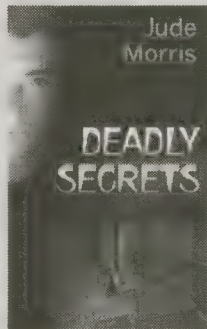


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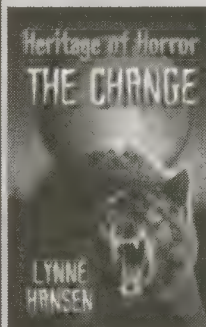
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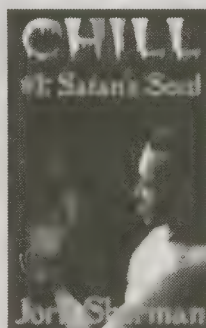


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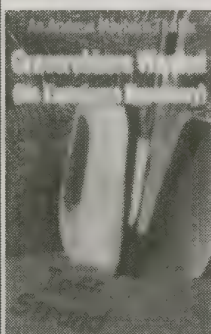
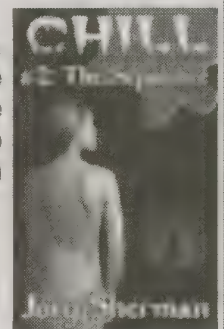
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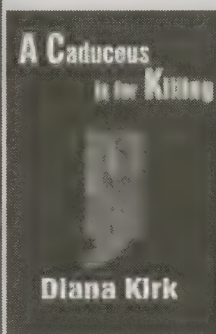
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# A Conversation With

## DAVID MORRELL

conducted by Hank Wagner

BORN IN KITCHENER, Ontario in 1943, David Morrell moved to the United States in 1966. Morrell is probably most famous for creating John Rambo, who first appeared in 1972 in Morrell's debut novel, the groundbreaking *First Blood*. Since that time, Morrell has published nineteen other novels and novelizations, among them the best selling thrillers *The Brotherhood of the Rose* and *The Fifth Profession*. Of special note to horror fans are his novel *The Totem* (in both its incarnations) and his short story collections *Black Evening* (which features, among others, his award winning novellas "The Beautiful Uncut Hair of Graves," and "Orange is For Anguish, Blue is for Insanity") and the imminent Subterranean Press volume *Nightscape*.

Also notable is Morrell's fictional memoir dealing with the untimely death from cancer of his fifteen-year-old son Matthew, one of the most heart-rending books you'll ever read. Finally, aspiring writers will definitely want to read 2002's *Lessons From a Lifetime of Writing: A Novelist Looks at His Craft*, which Peter Straub described as "...the best guidebook to both writing and the business of writing that I've ever read."

For additional information on this intriguing and learned author, go to [www.davidmorrell.net](http://www.davidmorrell.net). There you'll find information on upcoming projects, personal appearances, and the like. Especially interesting is the section on Fans' Frequently Asked Questions, where Morrell deals with queries like "Where did you come up with the name Rambo?" and "What made you decide to become a writer?"

This interview was conducted in June and December 2003. An edited version was previously published in *Hellnotes*.

**CD** I read that you broke your collarbone a few months back...?

**DM** Oh, you heard about that! I broke the collarbone at a knife-fighting class I was taking. The class was taught by the noted knife manufacturer and teacher Ernest Emerson. By the way, a knife he designed features heavily in my new book, *The Protector*. In fact, that very knife is featured on the cover of the book. It's kind of cool the way it's reproduced there—it's the actual size, and, if you run your hand along the reproduction of the knife, the handle feels the way the real handle does.

I ran into Ernest in my travels—he's the real deal, he teaches Navy Seals and people like that. He suggested I take the course and I agreed. It's an incredibly brutal course, two days of eight hours each, I've never been so tired in my life. In the middle of the second day, I crashed to the ground, fell wrong and broke the damn bone. But I stayed the course, Ernest was impressed. Ultimately, it's good for my tough guy image.

The arm was pretty much back to normal after five weeks. Luckily, I live in Sante Fe, a city many consider to be the physical therapy capital of the world. I received therapy, and used magnets, which helped. I should also mention that in addition to the broken collarbone, I had a hand-shaped bruise on one arm that lingered for three weeks, the result of intense grappling with my fellow students.

**CD** What kind of people do you meet at these classes?

**DM** Most of the time it's professionals in the fields I write about. For instance, I've received training as an executive protector, or protective agent, as they call them now, the profession I focus on in *The Protector*. Those classes were conducted by a US Marshall who was part of the team that protected John Hinckley after he shot President Reagan. I've had some really top instructors over

the years, as one professional contact has led to another.

A good example of how I meet people involves the movie *RONIN* with Robert DeNiro. Disallowing the over-the-top storyline, the way the characters conducted themselves—what I call the trade craft, the depiction of the spy world they were operating in—was so accurate it could be used as a training film. I noticed only one error—in one scene, DeNiro is at an outdoor café with his back to the street as he talks on the phone. Otherwise, I was struck by the authenticity of this thing.

The driving in that film caught my attention. I realized I had been trained to do a lot of things, but I've never worked with cars. I phoned a friend who worked for the Diplomatic Security Service, which is one of the three top protective agencies in the government, along with the US Marshals and the Secret Service, and I asked him where they learned how to handle cars in the event that the person they were protecting was attacked. He sent me to the Bill Scott Raceway in West Virginia where many government agencies send their people. I spent five days at the track driving at relatively high speeds, learning how to handle spins, how to crash barricades, all the things you see in the movies. I then I wrote about it in *The Protector*.

**CD** All this training, how does it affect you in everyday life? Do you find yourself sizing people up at the mall, or in other normal everyday situations?

**DM** I allude to this type of behavior in *The Protector*. One of the legendary firearms instructors, Colonel Jeff Cooper, invented a color code that went from white to red, red being a very dangerous situation. Basically, he was trying to use it to get people to think



more clearly about the situations they might find themselves in.

Generally, most civilians walk around with a kind of "rob me, assault me" attitude, even if they're not consciously aware of that. They're oblivious to their surroundings. Basically, they're prey. That's white.

I usually find myself in "condition yellow," which is a general, cautious awareness. If one is getting out of a car in a mall parking lot, one should take the time to stop and assess his or her situation. It's amazing, if you stop to look around, you can tell whether things look right or not. It's just a good practice to have that general awareness. I have that, and on several occasions it's proven useful.

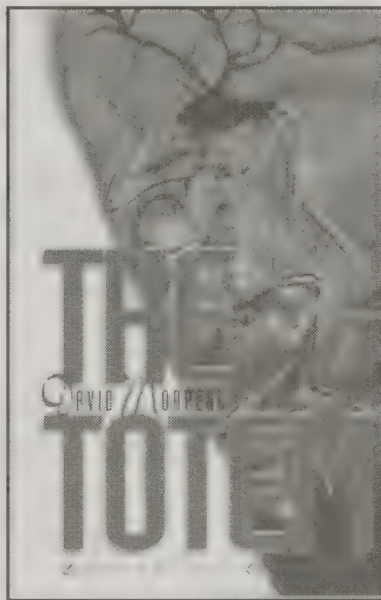
The range moves from yellow to orange to red. Security people commonly sign off with the phrase "keep in condition yellow."

**CD** What inspired you to write *The Protector*?

**DM** When I studied under Philip Klass at Penn State, he suggested that one way for a writer to stand out from the pack is to understand what moved him most. He suggested that it was fear that moved me, which I think is true, I get up everyday expecting the worse. That probably has something to do with my upbringing, my mother instilled a lot of anxiety in me. This idea of fear is in many ways what all my books have been about. However, I've never really addressed the idea overtly.

The military is very concerned with the physical effects of fear. The problem for the military is how to condition soldiers to handle and channel fear. They've been working on many sophisticated devices. I extrapolated from the research I know is currently being conducted, speculating that someone had actually created a way to induce fear in the enemy, rendering them helpless.

I thought it would be interesting to write about someone who thrives on fear, someone who discovers for the first time just what fear really is. Thus, I created Cavanaugh, an "adrenaline junkie," a professional protector, who, because he's been introduced to a chemical agent that makes him fearful, is forced to really face that emotion for the first time. The book was based on a series of dramatic ironies, the chief among them being that a man who thrives on fear becomes



afraid, and a man who makes a living as a protector becomes a hunter.

**CD** *The Protector* contains several stunning action sequences, the first of which begins in a warehouse in New Jersey. How did you sustain the tension over the course of these long sequences?

**DM** Simply, I accurately described the manner in which a professional bodyguard, or protector, would react to the situations I set up in the book. I like to dispel myths. I just cringe when I watch a movie where someone blows up a car by shooting at its gas tank. That doesn't happen with normal ammunition, you're not going to set fire to anything, you'll only cause the car to lose fuel. So, in a chase scene early on in the book, I have Cavanaugh disable his pursuer's vehicle in a more realistic manner.

**CD** What makes this novel different from previous novels of yours which also had a heavy focus on tradecraft?

**DM** I take pride in not repeating myself. For instance, after writing a couple of tradecraft novels in the nineties, I wrote thrillers in which photography and painting featured heavily (namely *Double Image* and *Burnt Sienna*). But, ever since I wrote *The Fifth Profession*, fans have been asking me to do another book like that. If I wasn't going to repeat myself, how could I write another book "like" *The Fifth Profession*?

The answer lies in the challenges I set for myself. In this instance, I set out to write a book with more action than I'd ever put in a book before, to maybe write a book that had more action than any other book ever had before. At the same time, I wanted to cram it with the tradecraft that I had been learning since the early nineties. Thus, I structured the book in seven arcs, each featuring its own protracted action sequence.

**CD** In 2002, you published *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*, where you answer many questions about writing, including "Where do you get your ideas?" You answered that question in quite some detail. Why, in your opinion, does that question aggravate so many writers?

**DM** I think it might have something to do with the distinction between people who are born teachers and those who are not. I was a teacher for so long, questions stimulate me. I want to overwhelm the questioner with information. I've seen the response you described, some writers answer aggressively when this question is posed.

We have to remember that, for the person asking the question, the question is new. Years ago, at the height of the Rambo hysteria, the question I most frequently got was "Where on earth did you get the idea for the character?" It became a little wearying to answer that question as often as I did. Then I realized that although I'd answered the question a thousand times, each individual questioner was hearing the answer for the first time. At that point, the teacher in me kicked in, and I was able to keep the answer fresh.

Questions of this nature are a big part of why I set up the FAQ section of my web site.

**CD** I looked at that in preparation for this interview. I love the fact that Rambo is named after a type of apple.

**DM** Basically, I set out to try to provide useful information in a manner that was relatively easy to access.

**CD** Let's talk about your shorter work...

**DM** I've been fortunate to have stories in many of the major

horror anthologies of the past thirty years and to have worked with such master editors and fiction writers as Charlie Grant, Dennis Etchison, Joe Lansdale, Douglas Winter, and Al Sarrantonio. From the *Whispers*, *Shadows*, *Night Visions*, and *Masters Of Darkness* series, all the way up to *Dark At Heart*, *Metahorror*, *Prime Evil*, *Revelations*, 999, and *Redshift*. A lot of others. I have a story in Kealan Patrick Burke's upcoming *Taverns Of The Dead* and another in Al Sarrantonio's upcoming *Flights: Extreme Visions Of Fantasy*.

Many of my shorter works were collected in *Black Evening*, which Cemetery Dance published—given the name of this magazine, I can't resist the plug. I've now got a second collection, *Nightscape*, which Subterranean Press is publishing.

**CD** Can you talk a little about the stories in the new collection?

**DM** I've been writing short stories since 1972 when *First Blood* was published. While my novels tend to be high-action thrillers, the stories are

solidly in the tradition of horror and fantasy. The exceptions among the novels are *The Totem*, which was cited in *Horror: 100 Best Books*, and *Long Lost*, which I intended as a horror novel, complete with a moody, frightening house.

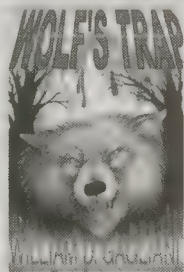
In 1999, when I decided to collect a group of my stories, many of them Horror Writers Association winners and nominees, in *Black Evening*, I chose 1992 as the cut-off date. That year was significant for me because that was when I moved from Iowa City to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and began what I thought of as the third act of my life. But between 1992 and now, I've written a lot of new stories. Plus, there are some pre-1992 items that I hadn't included in *Black Evening*, notably a half-hour script I did for the classic TV series *Monsters*. So I decided it was time for another collection.

One difference between the two collections is that the stories in *Black Evening* became longer as the book progressed whereas the pieces in *Nightscape* are mostly very long. "If I Should Die Before I Wake" and "Rio Grande Gothic" are almost mini-novels. The first is about

the harrowing 1918 flu epidemic, and the second is about shoes abandoned on a roadway. Every day, a different pair of shoes. This is a phenomenon that's been happening across the country. A Santa Fe police officer becomes obsessed with learning why the shoes are being abandoned. One day, he finds a pair of cut-off feet in the shoes. Then the fun starts. It's my favorite piece in the collection. Very hair-raising. Plus, it gave me a chance to describe the distinctive New Mexico/Santa Fe, Land of Enchantment/City Different surroundings that I now call home.

**CD** You constantly mention your idols, your mentors, people like Philip Klass and Stirling Silliphant. You've had these heroes, these beacons in your life showing you the way...have you filled the same role for other writers?

**DM** Unfortunately no, not that I'm aware, I might have...it might have something to do with the fact that I'm basically a hermit.



## Wolf's Trap

A Novel of Horror & Suspense by William D. Gagliani

Cover Art by Brad Foster  
Published by Yard Dog Press  
ISBN 1-893687-44-9  
\$18.00 (retail)

"Gagliani has brought bite back to the werewolf novel... will grab you by the reading jugular and keep you clawing the pages until the story's exciting conclusion." - CNN.com Headline News Book Lizard review by James Argendell

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"Well written, and well paced... balanced by a delicious sexual tension that flows through it like an underground river of lava. This book flows hot, and ends with a big red bang. Recommended to anyone who likes their horror hot, wet and just a little bit nasty." - Edo van Belkom, author of *Scream Queen* and *Blood Road*

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"Wolf's Trap delivers plenty of sex and violence... Werewolf fans should be more than pleased with this solid effort." - *Flesh & Blood Magazine*

"Hey man, the musical score alone in Wolf's Trap as it plays in your head is worth the price of admission." — Evan Kingsbury, author of *Fire & Flesh*

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CD Even with your teaching?

DM I taught American literature at the University of Iowa, so I didn't have a lot of fiction-writing students asking me about the mechanics of putting together a novel. When I've tried, I've found that it leads to a lot of tension and personality conflicts. For one thing, the only style and approach I understand is my own, and I worry that I'll inadvertently turn an apprentice writer into a version of me, not a useful thing to do. Also, I've discovered that a lot of would-be writers love the idea of being published but aren't willing to do the work. They become resentful if I prod them into making necessary changes in a very first-draft manuscript.

There's a writer, Marcus Wynne, who was in the 82nd Airborne. A former literature student of mine at Iowa, he later became a Federal Air Marshal. Out of the blue about three years ago, he got in touch with me and asked if I would read his unpublished novel. I agreed.

Oh my god, what a book, a wonderful book! It was called *No Other Option*, and it used a lot of accurate action details that he'd learned when he was in the military and in the air marshals. He's since published another called *Warrior In The Shadows* and yet another came out earlier this year. I made a couple of minor dialogue suggestions with regard to toning down some of the expletives, but in no way was I a mentor.

CD You place special importance on the role of your mentors/heroes in your life.

DM My father died in the Second World War and I never got over the loss. My mother tried raising me alone, then I was put in an orphanage. I constantly felt the lack of a benign male authority figure in my life, so I tended to gravitate to people I admired.

My move to the United States came about when, in my fourth year in college, I discovered a book about Hemingway written by Philip Young. I was so captivated by this book that I asked my wife to quit her high school teaching job and take our young child from Ontario, Canada to the US so I could attend Penn State where Philip Young taught. I think my life might have been very different had I not discovered his book.

I'm very conscious of one thing leading to another. If I hadn't watched

*Route 66*, I never would have met Stirling Silliphant. If I hadn't read Philip Young, I wouldn't have gone to Penn State. If I hadn't gone to Penn State, I wouldn't have met Philip Klass, who wrote under the name William Tenn. Those were the three big moments in my creative career. In a way all three men were like fathers to me.

CD I'm trying to picture the interior of your home. I imagine it's equipped with a huge library?

DM You can get a pretty good idea of the layout of my house if you read *Extreme Denial*. That novel is set in Santa Fe. The hero's house is based on mine. It's an adobe-pueblo style that vaguely resembles a Mexican hacienda. It rambles. There are books all over it. A great writer used to own my house, a man named Edward T. Hall, a cultural anthropologist who pioneered the notions of personal space and body language. He was raised here in New Mexico, and he worked for the State Department, teaching diplomats about different cultures. Some of his ideas are early versions of what became known as Neuro-linguistic Programming, a way of using language that the CIA teaches its operatives so that they can better debrief and recruit agents. I'm a certified practitioner of NLP and use it often in my thrillers. In any case, given that Edward Hall owned my house, it's no surprise that there are floor to ceiling bookshelves in almost every room.



CD How has your style evolved over the years?

DM I never thought of myself as a particularly descriptive writer, but reading something of recent vintage like "Rio Grande Gothic," I was struck by how spare that was. It's nineteen thousand words, a more verbose writer could have gotten a novel out of it.

Years ago, my agent encouraged me to write longer books because of changing marketing trends. Until then, my manuscripts had been around 300 pages. So I wrote a novel that was twice as long, only to have my editor cut it back to 300 pages. You see, I'd made the mistake of thinking that a big novel meant more words, so I'd packed the book with description, the only time I ever did that, and thank God, the long version of that book, *Blood Oath*, was never published. Now I have a mantra I repeat to myself: "A bigger book is not more words. It's more incidents. If the incidents have power, the words will take care of themselves."

Another major influence on me was James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, that book was a major revelation to me; I was amazed to discover it was possible to write so powerfully using so few words. That influence still persists.

CD Let's talk about violence. You've been credited with breaking down barriers in this area. Do you think that as a culture we've lost our ability to be shocked by the violence, which pervades our entertainment?

DM Yes. I've been thinking a lot about that lately, especially the violence featured in today's video games. More specifically, I've been thinking about the military and law enforcement's use of video games to train their personnel. I was permitted to observe an anti-drug unit that was going to be raiding crack houses, so I was in their offices, where I saw them using video games like *Soldier of Fortune*. You could feel the energy level rising as they played these games—they were using games as a way of conditioning themselves, desensitizing themselves, getting their instincts primed. It's disturbing to think of young people using these games, games which are perfect vehicles for training people to do violent things in a controlled way. I don't see any useful purpose for such games on an entertainment level, or in

anything to do with civilian life. It's a big deal for me, this desensitization, and I never thought I'd say that.

It always seemed to me that violence, or action, when properly presented, was perfectly acceptable. A good example would be a film like Sam Peckinpah's *THE WILD BUNCH*. My favorite film, it says a lot about the effects and consequences of violence, there was a moral dimension to it that's not present in the context of video games.

**CD** It's interesting how standards have changed. I watched the original *ROLLERBALL* a few nights ago, which was considered incredibly violent for its time. Yet, watching its stylized violence today, it seems almost quaint how the filmmakers presented the action. Besides books like *First Blood*, you've also pushed that boundary with books like your unpublished novel *Intruder*. I've always found it interesting that someone of your stature couldn't get a book published.

**DM** Now it's old-fashioned, but it was real cutting edge at the time. I just couldn't get anyone to publish it.

Remember, this was back in 1979, the Rambo movies had not yet come out, and I hadn't had a national bestseller yet. *Intruder* was inspired by an incident in Iowa City, where I then lived, in which an attorney, who really knew the limits of the law, had become a stalker, tormenting his wife. He was really scaring the hell out of her, following her, it was a horrific situation. I didn't want to do a story based on that, but it was really a frightening thing. I took the idea of a stalker in a different direction. Among other things, there was a really long scene in a women's shelter that was under siege.

**CD** Since then though, the concept's been visited several times, as in the movie, *SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY*, or even in Stephen King's *Rose Madder*.

**DM** You see, that's the difference, *SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY* came much later. I did half the book, and was very pleased with it. The villain had been disfigured in a fire, he kept having to wear disguises. He was also having fugue states where he suddenly wouldn't know where he was.

I sent the unfinished book to my agent, who was horrified, next to my

then-editor, who, strangely, felt that the woman who was being stalked deserved to be beaten (he's not my editor any more). I also sent it to a number of other people, none of whom could wrap their minds around this subject matter.

Stephen King and I were fairly close at the time. He read the book, what was then written, and he introduced me to his editor, who also was a little nervous about publishing it. I finally concluded that I was wasting my time. Time marched on, then *SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY* came out, and in rapid succession, it became a genre. Stephen subsequently wrote to me and asked if I was ever going to do anything with my spouse abuse story and I said probably not, and the next thing I knew, he had a book out.

One of these days I might dust it off and finish it...

**CD** Stephen King has been publicly discussing his retirement. After several decades in the field, do you find yourself facing burnout?

**DM** I'll tell you, *The Protector* was so packed with action, I'm not sure that I'd be able to repeat that. I seem to have plenty of ideas, the key is to find time to put them all on paper. After finishing *The Protector*, I started two books, got a hundred pages into both of them, and set them aside. There's an extra element that each book needed, and I haven't yet decided what that element is. However, inspiration struck again. I've started a new action novel that I'm very excited about—the trick will be to get past that magical 100-page mark.

**CD** If you could have written any book, what would it have been?

**DM** Of the books in my "territory," I would love to have written *Rogue Male* (Geoffrey Household), or *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (James M. Cain). I think Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a masterpiece. Most people only know the story through the films—it's extraordinary to see what Stoker was able to do in an epistolary mode. That was so exciting. If I could have written *Dracula*, I would have been a happy creature.

**CD** Who do you read for pleasure?

**DM** I'm a big Dan Simmons fan. The only three writers I have a complete collection of are Ernest Hemingway, Geoffrey Household, and Dan Simmons. All the Simmons books are signed; he's a good friend of mine. He's not only a talented writer; he's also an efficient one. Lately, I've been reading Stephen Hunter.

**CD** My guess is that you'd have a natural affinity for Hunter's novels.

**DM** I've favorably reviewed a couple of Hunter's books for the *Washington Post*, *Hot Springs* and *Havana*. I plan to make my way through all his work. I sent him an e-mail a while ago to tell him how much I've enjoyed his work, and he responded quite kindly.

**CD** I can see why you'd enjoy his work, you both explore similar territory in your novels.

**DM** *First Blood* really did start something. I often refer to it as the father of modern action novels and films. Hunter didn't say anything, but I wonder if I was a small influence there...it's hard to say...

**CD** Anything else you'd like to cover?

**DM** The only other thing I'd like to do is plug my previous novel, *Long Lost*, which was recently issued in a paperback edition. I'm quite surprised that the horror community didn't pick up on *Long Lost* as a horror novel, that's the way I thought of it while I was writing it.

**CD** We (my fellow IHG judges and I) have this discussion every year in deciding the nominees for the International Horror Guild Awards. Is such and such a novel horror? For instance, is Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon* a horror novel?

**DM** To me, there's no question that it's horror. In my mind, it's an issue of tone and emotion; a "monster" can be natural or supernatural. But the common denominator, the defining element in horror literature, is fear.



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# JOHN WILSON

Clifford V. Brooks

CLIFFORD V. BROOKS is a technical writer living in San Francisco, CA. He shares his apartment with a pair of jungle cat/domestic cat hybrids and a savage garden of meat-eating plants. He is currently at work on the second novel in his *Shadow Walkers* trilogy.

Shit.  
You don't have to believe me.  
I'm not going to get pissed off,  
call you names,  
or have a hissy fit.  
That's not my style.  
You can even tell me I'm full of shit if you like.  
But I'm not.  
I really did see a ghost.  
And it's not what you think.  
Not like you've been told.  
It wasn't all glowin' and shimmery.  
No white sheets.  
No chains.  
No nothing.  
It looked like John Wilson.  
Kinda-sorta how I expected John Wilson to look.  
I guess I should explain.  
Until he walked through that door,  
I didn't really know what John Wilson looked like.  
He didn't exist.  
It's a combination of two of my boyfriends.  
John has the athletic body.  
Knows how to use it, too.  
No complaints there.  
But whenever we go out,  
he's on me.  
Tells me that I've had enough to drink,  
when I've just gotten started.  
Keeps telling me about his father.  
How he died.  
Liver failure or some shit.  
I tell him that he's not me.  
Not my problem.  
And then things get sour.  
Quiet.  
And I'm thinking,  
everything would be okay  
if he'd just drink his mineral water and shut the fuck up.  
Then there's Wilson.  
He'll tie one on with the best of them.  
We party well together,  
make decent love,  
and laugh.

When he's not working.  
32 hours a week,  
in a restaurant,  
doing dishes.  
Brings home less than half of what I do.  
Much less.  
Hopes to become head dishwasher some day.  
Shit.  
Don't get me wrong,  
I'm not some money-hungry bitch  
out to live off daddy's tit,  
but come on,  
Head dishwasher?  
Do I sound angry?  
I'm not.  
I get what I want.  
Need.  
Always have.  
Do what I gotta do.  
But it's not real.  
Lasting.  
So I combined the best parts of both,  
and call him John Wilson.  
Hell, if I were a singer,  
I'd write a song about him.  
I'm not though.  
Beauty college graduate,  
1996.  
Fiesta Cuts.  
Not the worst job.  
Get to talk shit all day.  
And do hair.  
You meet all sorts of people.  
All sorts.  
Nothing I couldn't deal with.  
Until John Wilson.  
Does it sound like I've been doing some good shit or what?  
Anyway,  
he walked in.  
I think it was a Monday.  
Maybe Tuesday.  
Does it matter?  
I was alone in the shop, doing this old woman's hair.  
Or what was left of it.  
Lots of spray and uplifts.  
Hide the scalp.  
She was showing me a picture of her youngest granddaughter.  
Nearly my age.  
Degree from some university back East.  
The girl was all smiling and stuff in the picture.

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I don't know why.  
Her hair looked like shit.  
All goofy and puffed up like she'd just pulled off a ski cap.  
I wanted to laugh.  
The old woman was going on about all the degrees and honors  
this girl had gotten.  
I could tell she hadn't seen her in a long time.  
All she'd gotten was that sorry-ass picture and an invitation  
to the graduation;  
no need to attend,  
just send money.  
As I picked at her hair and made "uh-huh" noises  
my attention strayed to John Wilson.  
Damn,  
he was fine.  
Tall.  
Dark hair.  
In need of a cut,  
but not bad.  
Five o'clock shadow.  
Tight jeans.  
Muscle shirt.  
Muscles.  
The old woman yelped.  
I'd picked her soft scalp.  
Sorry ma'am, I told her.  
Didn't remember her name.  
Should.  
She's a regular.  
John Wilson just stood there while all this was going on.  
There were plenty of places to sit.  
Have a seat, I told him.  
He did.  
Real slow like.  
As if he was moving underwater.  
I liked that.  
Didn't spook me at first.  
I didn't know then.  
Not 'til later.  
You got an appointment? I asked him as I handed Miss  
Grandma a mirror.  
Do I need one? he asked.  
Not like I just said it though,  
like a smart ass,  
but real innocent like.  
Like it just never crossed his mind.  
Usual way, I said. But you're in luck. I don't have another  
appointment 'til three.  
He kinda smiled then.  
\$25, I told Miss Grandma, then excused myself to the back  
room.  
Checked my appointment book.  
May Singleton was due in fifteen minutes.  
Called her.  
She picked up on the fifth ring,  
all out of breath.  
Said she was just on her way out the door when the phone  
rang.  
Told her there'd been an emergency.  
Needed to cancel her appointment.  
Would Thursday be all right?  
When I returned,

Grandma was straining,  
trying to place the mirror on the counter.  
I took the mirror from her,  
afraid she might drop it.  
She looked around her chair for her purse.  
She never lets it out of her sight,  
but always manages to lose it.  
Told her it was in her lap.  
She laughed.  
Thanked me.  
John Wilson was reading a copy of *Rolling Stone* magazine.  
An old issue.  
The one with Janet Jackson on the cover.  
The one where some guy's hands are covering her breasts like  
clam shells.  
Strong hands.  
Nice nails.  
John Wilson had nice hands.  
Grandma gave me a 25¢ tip.  
I forgot to thank her.  
She said something to me as she left.  
Probably about her granddaughter.  
I shook out the apron she'd worn.  
Wisps of hair floated gracefully down.  
Sunlight coming through the blinds made them glimmer like  
silver.  
Everything seemed magical right then.  
Like in a fairy tale.  
Like it was gonna happen.  
John Wilson.  
Prince Charming.  
Come on over and have a seat, I said.  
He got up and moved into the chair,  
real slow like.  
Not like he was underwater this time,  
but like he had to think about what he was doing.  
I grabbed my broom.  
Leaned against it.  
How are you today? I said.  
I wanted to hear his voice again.  
I need a haircut, he told me.  
I began to sweep the old woman's cut hair into a pile.  
There was more on the floor than on her head.  
More than she'd ever have again.  
Eighty if she was a day.  
But she wasn't important right then.  
It was John Wilson.  
His dull response.  
Had he misunderstood me?  
Well, you've come to the right place, I told him.  
Sign said haircuts, he said.  
His hair was shoulder length,  
a bit ragged at the edges.  
Almost as long as mine.  
What do you want done? I said, propping the broom in the  
corner.  
Hair cut. Sign said.  
I realized then that he wasn't much at conversation.  
That was all right.  
Neither was John.  
And we'd made it nearly a year.  
A trim? A style? What would you like? I asked,

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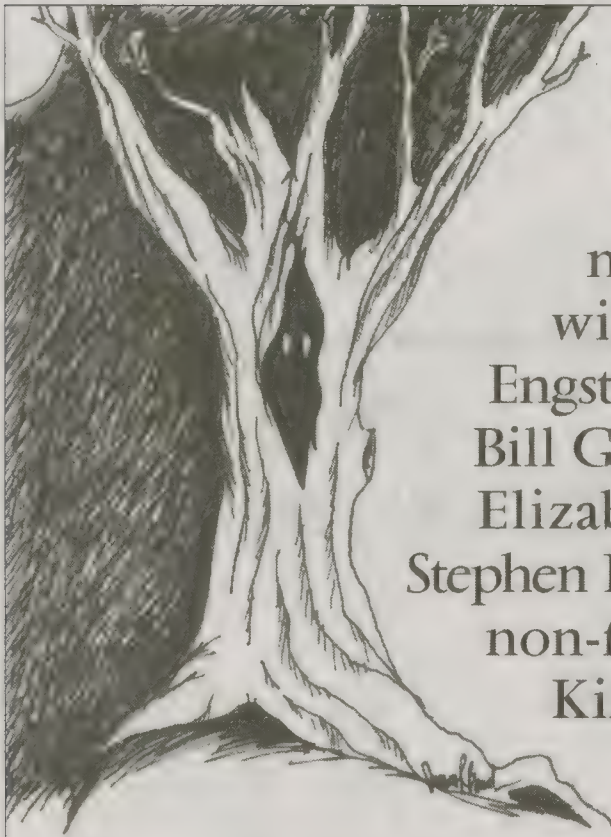
real suggestive like.  
I want to look like him, he said, holding up the magazine.  
The *Rolling Stone*.  
Had he brought it with him or was it one of mine?  
It was an ad for Guess Jeans.  
The model had a short cut.  
Clean shaven.  
He was wearing jeans.  
So was John Wilson.  
And a muscle shirt.  
So was John Wilson.  
Loafers.  
I looked down at John Wilson's feet.  
And I laughed.  
I mean hard.  
Not some prissy,  
covered-mouth shit.  
Full bore.  
He looked at me strange.  
I'm sorry, I said. It's just that I'm not used to people going so far and all.  
My stomach hurt, you know,  
trying to hold back.  
Wasn't working.  
I wiped my eyes.  
He looked at me,  
confused like,  
innocent.  
Like he didn't see the humor.  
I'm here for a haircut, he said, like he needed to remind me or something.  
I know, I know.  
I moved behind him.  
Pulled my scissors out of their antiseptic goo,  
rinsed them,  
dried them on the drape towel,  
and began to cut.  
Like cutting air.  
I pricked my finger.  
Shit.  
My hair, he said, as I shook my throbbing finger. Cut my hair.  
All right, all right. I cut my damn finger is all.  
I don't usually cuss much.  
Not around customers.  
But shit,  
John Wilson was bugging me.  
When was the last time you got your hair cut, I asked, sucking my finger.  
I couldn't taste blood,  
only hairspray.  
He looked at me like I'd just asked him when was the last time he'd taken a shit.  
Styles change, he answered.  
They sure do, I said.  
I picked up my scissors again.  
If you're not in style, people stare, he said.  
Yeah, I agreed.  
I think that's when I realized that he didn't have much over Forrest Gump.  
Good enough for a one-night stand though.  
He was kinda sweet.

In a dumb kind of way.  
Thought I might be doing him a favor.  
'Til I began to cut again.  
His hair.  
So fine.  
Like silk.  
Only finer.  
Lighter.  
It slipped *through* my fingers.  
I couldn't get a grip on it.  
Your hair, I began.  
Cut it, he said.  
But...it's so light. So light.  
Cut it, he said.  
My finger began to bleed again.  
Where I'd pricked it,  
a drop,  
a single drop,  
fell on his hair.  
It glistened.  
I turned to grab the drape towel from the sink.  
Turned back.  
The drop was gone.  
He turned and looked at me.  
A smile on his face.  
Like I'd just done him a favor.  
Yeah, that kind of satisfied look.  
A slant of light from the window above the door stabbed him.  
Went through him.  
Cut it, he said.  
This time the innocence was gone.  
He meant it.  
But, I said as my fingers slipped through his locks.  
Sign said haircuts, he said.  
He was getting pissed.  
No innocence this time.  
I can't, I can't get it.  
Cut! he shouted.  
I was flipping out by then.  
Thinking acid flashback,  
big time.  
I'd only used acid once,  
but shit,  
this wasn't real.  
Couldn't be.  
I didn't believe in ghosts.  
Cut it!  
He kept saying it.  
Over and over.  
Like house music, you know,  
stuck in an endless loop.  
I tried to tell him that I couldn't help him,  
But he wouldn't listen.  
He just kept demanding that I cut his hair.  
My finger was still bleeding.  
Throbbing.  
Another drop.  
Squeezed free.  
A blob.  
Sitting there.  
Making contact with his neck.

And then it was gone.  
Sucked in, like through a straw.  
I shook my head.  
Why wasn't I afraid?  
Of him.  
John Wilson.  
So different from me.  
Ethereal.  
Did I say "ethereal"?  
Shit, I don't really know what that means,  
but I know it's the right word.  
Accurate.  
Cuz he was there.  
But he wasn't.  
Different.  
Not like you or me,  
but there nonetheless.  
And I wanted him.  
More than before.  
Inside me.  
Deep inside me.  
And he knew.  
So he shut up.  
Closed those full lips of his.  
And he entered me.  
Fully.  
Fully clothed,  
both of us.  
I didn't even see him get up.  
Just suddenly.  
Inside me.  
But it wasn't sex.  
Not like you think.  
It was better.  
More complete.  
I felt him everywhere.  
Under my skin.  
Beneath my scalp.  
Between my thighs.  
It was incredible.  
More like anticipation than the real thing.  
Perfect.  
John.  
Wilson.  
I let out a deep breath.  
A sigh.  
And he was gone.  
Time had slipped by.  
Almost seven.  
I didn't remember anything at first,  
except the pleasure.  
It had seemed like moments.  
An extended orgasm.  
But now I felt so empty.  
So alone.  
Like he'd taken part of me with him.  
I reminded myself of the truth.  
That all he'd really come for was a haircut.  
I smiled.  
Wondered if there'd be a next time.  
Wondered if this was it.  
Time to leave.

Close shop.  
It was late.  
I was late.  
And then the door opened.  
I thought it might be him.  
Hoped.  
But it was Miss Grandma.  
And before I could say anything she told me what she  
wanted.  
Her purse.  
She was looking for her purse.  
She didn't notice anything different about me.  
Except my hair.  
You cut it, she said.  
Your beautiful red hair.  
I reached up to my shoulder.  
My fingers grasped at the air.  
I turned.  
Looked in the mirror.  
You look like a man, she said.  
Or something like that.  
She'd mumbled.  
I hadn't been listening.  
Sign said haircuts, I said.  
I cut people's hair.  
She looked at me real strange.  
Then down at the clumps of red hair that covered the floor.  
She began to speak again.  
I stopped her.  
John Wilson's hair, I said.  
I cut people's hair.  
She moved away from me,  
a pained look on her face,  
like my words confused her to the point of discomfort.  
And she began to look around the shop.  
Under the chairs.  
Beneath the mound of magazines.  
*The Rolling Stone.*  
In the vanity drawers.  
Until she'd looked in all the likely places three or four times,  
and the unlikely ones twice.  
Then she left,  
confused.  
Without her purse.  
Neither of us said goodbye.  
We should have.  
She died three weeks later.  
Paper said in her sleep.  
I didn't go to the funeral.  
I didn't want to.  
No need.  
It's her purse that matters now.  
I know she's out there.  
Frantic.  
Looking for something she never lost.  
And something she'll never find.  
John Wilson.  
Shit.





# DARK DISCOVERIES

Issue #1 (Spring 2004) is out now and features new interviews with Douglas Clegg and Elizabeth Engstrom; new fiction by Bev Vincent, Bill Gauthier, Kathryn Mattingly, and Elizabeth Engstrom; non-fiction on Stephen King by Rocky Wood; an extensive non-fiction bibliography of Stephen King; book reviews, art, and more.

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JOHN PELAN

## COLLECTING MODERN HORROR

I'M AFRAID that we begin this column on a sad note: Just as I begin writing the opening lines of this column with the material on the passing of Joan Aiken, I received word that William Relling, Jr. had died, apparently a suicide. I'm afraid that the commonality is that neither author really got the attention that they deserved from our genre during their lifetimes. First, let me talk about Joan Aiken just a bit, she is on our core collection list for *The Green Flash and Other Stories*, essentially a reissue of *The Windscreen Weepers*, though with the annoying publishing trick of swapping a couple of stories so that the completist needs to buy both US and UK editions. (A similarly annoying stunt was done with Nigel Kneale's *Tomato Cain*, a title omitted from our list due only to the prohibitive price of the book in either state.)

Because Joan Aiken wrote stories, novels, plays, TV scripts, poetry, and even a how-to book, it was difficult to select just one volume for inclusion on the list. While I seriously considered *The Haunting of Lamb House*, it appeared too late (1991) to be included. *The Green Flash* remains the best single example of Aiken's short fiction, although there are at least half a dozen other collections that should merit your consideration if you like what you find in this volume. As the novel referenced above features both Henry James and E.F. Benson, it's certainly of interest to those that enjoy the classic ghost story.

Do not be put off by the fact that many of Aiken's supernatural collections are marketed toward "young readers." There's a lot of nastiness going on here,

and though with typical British restraint much of the awfulness is implied rather than shown, the implications are quite dreadful and the stories in general manage to raise a chill no matter what the reader's age.

William Relling, Jr. was one of the brightest (or should that be darkest) lights of the 1980s horror boom. Despite the tons of crap that littered the bookstore shelves then, some truly fine writers got their start then. David Schow, Michael Reaves, Ray Garton, Edward Lee, Brian Hodge, Relling... These were all names I'd look for on the contents pages of new magazines or anthologies. When the markets started drying up, the purveyors of crap went away and the folks writing the good stuff kept on trucking, though often being published as "suspense" rather than horror. Bill Relling's later work was more on the mystery and suspense side of things, but the man produced some very memorable short stories, (several of which appeared in this very magazine). One of the things that you could count on in the 1980s was that Scream Press would produce cool books, (it might take you forever to get them, but they'd be worth the wait). The last Scream title announced was Bill's collection, *The Infinite Man*. The collection of twenty-one stories never appeared from Scream, as the publisher issued a galley and then folded up shop. In the interim the book has been announced by the Overlook Connection Press (and hopefully will soon materialize) and a collection has been issued from Wildside Press, a print-on-demand house. The

latter is available at a price of \$32.95. Keep an eye out for the Overlook Connection Press edition of *The Infinite Man*. I picked up one of the galleys in 1989 and I'd been hoping to see the book finally published. It's a shame that the author will never see it.

One another note: February and March brings us two titles from Ash-Tree Press that are sure to merit consideration (if not outright inclusion) on our list. The first is Violet Hunt's extraordinary collection *Tales of the Uneasy*. A remarkably expensive and difficult book in first edition, the stories will call to mind the works of Henry James and Edith Wharton, illustrious company indeed. This edition has some slight bit of editorial tampering done by yours truly...I've swapped versions of her novella "The Tiger Skin" with the later version that was separately published in 1924. My rationale is simple, if the author felt strongly enough about the tale to revise it for later publication when she had a secure enough reputation to not *have* to do so at the behest of her publisher, well then the later version would seem to represent the text that she'd have preferred to see preserved.

The other collection is an assemblage of the complete, weird fiction of H.B. Marriott-Watson, ably edited by James Doig. Marriott-Watson is no doubt familiar to many readers of this column for his widely-anthologized "The Devil of the Marsh" or his stirring Haggardesque adventure tales. This collection performs the valuable service of collecting all his known weirds in one

place. Marriott-Watson's career spans the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century well into the 20<sup>th</sup>, and as at least a goodly portion of the stories are from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I have no reservations about including this collection on our core list.

There's a plethora of interesting new books out, none of which we'll be adding to the list, but which nonetheless are worth your attention. Interestingly enough, the first two are books that I was (admittedly) predisposed to dislike...

For someone like me that makes his living as a small-press publisher as well as a writer, the idea of print-on-demand books is anathema. Generally speaking, these are the offerings of gutless dilettantes that haven't the courage of their convictions when publishing something and have figured out how to make the writer take all the risk. The very idea of a POD hardcover first edition is laughable...

That said, I must still (grudgingly) recommend Ann Schwader's collection *Strange Stars and Alien Shadows* from Lindisfarne Press. Lindisfarne is a micro "press" that started with "books" on CD-Rom and while the content was certainly interesting to fans of the Cthulhu Mythos, the presentation was nothing that a book-lover would get excited about. Their latest offering is a collection of Ann Schwader's weird fiction, mythos and non-mythos. It's an interesting balance of material that shows a fine writer in the process of developing her craft. The book itself is a sturdy hardcover and produced in POD fashion. It looks attractive enough, but



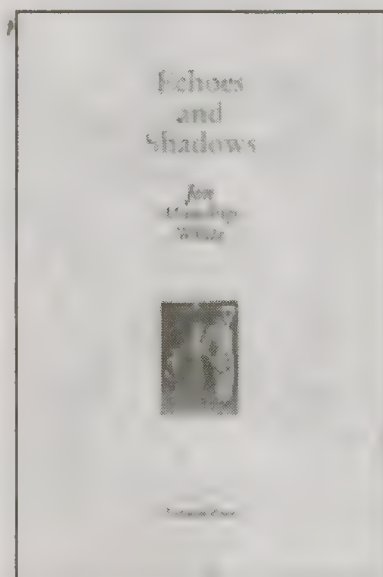
the nature of the production forces the publisher to forego some of the niceties one might wish for, such as a limitation page signed by the author instead of a cheesy sticker. Still, I can appreciate the publisher's dilemma in issuing this, Ann isn't a household name and one would have to work awfully hard to make this book a success in a 350-500 copy run. Still, maybe if enough people pick this up the publisher will be encouraged to shift gears into issuing real books instead of POD publications. The author certainly deserves a wider audience (as does Walter C. DeBill, whose collected work is only available in electronic form). At just \$20.00 for the hardcover, it's well-worth your attention.

The name E.C. Tubb is widely known in SF circles as the author of the interminable Dumarest of Terra series. For those that haven't had the pleasure, a colleague wrote of one of the later books "Tubb has been writing books like this for the last twenty-five years, someone should stop him." I couldn't agree more... Imagine my surprise when I received a package from Sarob Press containing *Mirror of the Night* by E.C. Tubb! This collection assembles ten stories from a variety of sources, mostly British digests such as *Badger's Supernatural Stories* and *Science Fantasy*. The book itself is presented sans dustjacket with illustrated boards, making it appear as though prepared for the library market (as it may well have been, this might signal a new direction for Sarob). The stories...well, I had read one Tubb horror story years ago in an anthology edited by Richard Harding Davis and recalled being pleasantly surprised. I also considered that many

British SF authors dabbled in the horror genre with very good results from time to time (Eric Frank Russell and John Wyndham coming readily to mind). So I delved in to see what it was that had intrigued Robert Morgan of Sarob sufficiently to produce this book. Not bad... but not *great*, as there's nothing here that will cause me to race off to the message boards touting a "forgotten master of the weird tale" (Cleve Cartmill or Eric Frank Russell, he ain't). Tubb is competent to very good in most of the stories here. There's certainly an indication that if the market for this type of story had been stronger in his heyday, E.C. Tubb might have produced a very memorable body of work. As it is, this is probably the only E.C. Tubb you or I need...

Lastly, a couple of titles that should definitely be on your list to read even if they are far too modern for our list: *Dangerous Red* by Mehitobel Wilson (this was reviewed in issue #47 by Wayne Edwards, and don't tell me you haven't bought a copy yet!) and *Echoes and Shadows* by Jon Manchip White from Tartarus Press. White is, in many ways, the literary step-child of Arthur Machen and I'd certainly suggest that his work is worth a look.

As always, there are a number of interesting new books on the horizon, I hope to be able to talk a bit about David Niall Wilson's new novella next time out as well as the first of two volumes collecting all of Violet Hunt's supernatural fiction. It continues to be a busy time for those collecting modern horror!





# Misdirection

Tony Richards

TONY RICHARDS is the author of three novels — *The Harvest Bride* (nominated for a Bram Stoker for Best First Novel), *Night Feast*, and the forthcoming *Postcards from Terri* (Sarob Press). Additionally, he's had some forty or so stories appear in such publications as *F&SF*, *Weird Tales*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Pan Horror*, *Dark Terrors*, and *The 3rd Alternative*. An inveterate traveler, he often uses the places he's been as settings for his work, although recently he's also been uncovering a rich, dark vein in his own hometown of London. He works as a full-time freelance writer, and lives in the north of the city with his wife.

He is coming towards me now, his dark and unreflective eyes fixed upon mine.

And there doesn't seem to be a thing that I can do about it...



I have heard that the population of Edinburgh, Scotland, pretty much doubles during the first three and a half weeks of August, the event has become so renowned.

The Edinburgh Festival. Drama. Dance. Art. Cinema. And jazz. The largest cultural gathering in the world. Sixteen hundred different shows running throughout it on a staggered rotation that begins about midday and can go on till well past midnight.

And the city's population doubles, like a sponge taking on too much water.

Visitors arrive from Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. Even the smallest, pokiest of guest-houses responds by upping its rates. People who have spare rooms in their homes will rent them out for the duration, to take up the overflow.

We had hired an apartment to ourselves for the two weeks that we were staying. Were up from London, mostly here to see the Fringe — what the Americans passing by us now might call 'off-Broadway'. Small productions starring nobody you'd ever heard of. Stand-up comics ranging from the brilliant to the banal. Avant-garde dance-troupes... *that* kind of thing.

You could keep the bigger shows. The Festival, for us, was an exploration, a mental adventure.

There was myself. There was my girlfriend, Cassie, who I'd only been with for two months, but with whom I was deeply in love. There was *her* best friend, Miranda. And there were my closest pair of pals from college days, big Ritch and pensive Daniel.

College had, in fact, only ended for the five of us a year ago. And this...? It was like going back and doing the fun parts all over again, just better.

We were into our fourth day. Were sitting almost literally in the shadow of the Castle, at an open-air café on the Royal Mile, taking a very late, rather quiet, somewhat hung-over breakfast. The bars in the modernistic Dome complex stay open till three in the morning, and the time passes almost without your noticing if you get chatting with some other crowd.

And...perhaps we had chosen the wrong location, considering the state that we were in. But almost *all* that doubled population seemed to be walking past us now. A lot of people were clutching programmes. But there were more than just civilians out here this late in the morning.

Actors were moving amongst the flow of normal people, advertising their shows in various novel ways. They were going past us dressed as hobos, penguins, sexy robots. Angels. I *think* Genghis Khan. On top of which, a fire-juggler was working the crowd in one direction, and a pair of buskers with full black-tie and cellos in the other.

We hadn't exactly chosen somewhere quiet, in other words. But — just the same as every other day we'd been here — the atmosphere started to infect us before too long, and we forgot how tired we were.

We began to discuss what we were going to give a try today. There was obviously a long potential list, and we'd been taking in a bare minimum four shows daily since we'd got here. Seen a good and solid play about an unemployed steel-worker being pushed over the edge. Another flimsier but striking one about the war against the Taliban. Five stand-up comics. A mime show that had rendered everybody quite speechless with boredom. And an astonishing visual-arts piece by a modern-dance collective from St. Petersburg, all weird lighting, dry ice, and luminous props.

So we went through the programme again, turning over the alternatives.

All the while we did this, the pile of flyers on our table grew. And if you've never been to the Festival before, that probably requires some explanation.

Sixteen hundred shows, all vying for the visitors' attention. There are posters everywhere, placed legally or otherwise. There are banners. There are t-shirts. There are the actors out plugging their own events. But most of all, there are the flyers. Printed handbills, mostly on thin cardboard. *Everybody* hands them out, pushing them towards you as you walk along the street, or simply slapping them down by your elbow if you're sitting at a table.

If you ever find yourself in Edinburgh without a bed for the night, you can at least make yourself a decent mattress, you get given so many of the things.

We took a casual, sideways notice of them as they tumbled down in front of us, one after the other.

'You, Myself, and Me, a one-woman show about the underlying grief of personal relationships.'

'An Hour with Kevin Morrison, brilliant stand-up humor by Tasmania's finest new comedian.'

'The Trap, a harrowing new drama by Igor Zetermelelian.'

'Carry On Forever, a tribute to Sid James.'

None appealed, certainly not this early in the day, though Daniel tried to claim that he had actually heard of Igor Zetermelelian.

Cassie started nuzzling my neck after a while, and so didn't see it when...what seemed to be a disembodied shadow suddenly loomed out of the crowd. Hovered over me, so closely that he genuinely made me flinch. Dropped a glossy, almost wholly black handbill next to my coffee cup. Then disappeared again.

It took my weary brain a few seconds to figure out what had just happened. It had been a man, dressed from head to toe in black. In what had to be some kind of cat-suit, with gloves and a full-head mask. Too weird.

But I picked up the flyer.

Cassie's head came back up—she was obviously wondering why I'd flinched. And then she looked at the thing as well.

"Here's a peculiar one," she murmured. "I can barely read it."

As I'd said, it was almost entirely black. But there was tiny, spidery red printing on it, the lettering so narrow that you had to squint to decipher it even in bright daylight. As though some wounded insect, bleeding profusely for a bug, had dragged itself across the pasteboard.

"Chopper," I read slowly out. "An entertainer with a difference. Pleasance Below at one o'clock."

Exactly *what* difference was nowhere explained.

"Intriguing presentation though," Ritch pointed out. Was he referring to the flyer, or the way that its distributor had been dressed, or both? With Ritch, you never could be quite sure. "Aren't we here for something different? We could always check it out."



"He's one of those extreme circus types," the young Australian woman at the Pleasance Courtyard box-office informed us. "You know, nails up the nose, juggling with chainsaws, that sort of thing."

Cassie's friend Miranda looked a little dubious at the sound of that. Not Cassie herself, though. She may look sweet and petite, but she's actually quite a hardy little cookie. Ritch and Daniel began to take more interest too.

"Today's his first show," the woman added. Which was odd, since we were halfway through the Festival. "The act who had his slot was forced to drop out yesterday—death in the family, something along those lines."

"Isn't that unusual?" Cassie asked her. "I mean, letting someone else take over at so late a stage?"

"I wouldn't know, I'm afraid. This is my first time here."

The Pleasance Courtyard, like the nearby Dome, is a student building most of the year round and converted to theatres during August. Unlike the Dome though, it's an old and dis-

orderly structure, somewhat reminiscent of those sprawling and quadrangled farmhouses-Napoleon used to fight battles around. The cobbled area at its heart was filled with people taking a drink and enjoying the sunshine between shows. Others disappeared inside to have lunch at the bistro, or stood in line by the various doorways, tickets in their hands.

"Oh, I practically forgot," the woman added. "It's two tickets for the price of one, just for today."

Which was a pretty standard Festival gambit to attract a good audience.

It decided us, though.

It was our first time in the Pleasance Below, and it turned out to be one of the smaller of the dozen or so theatres in the complex. Subterranean, obviously. The seating descending at a forty-five degree angle. Dark. Stuffy too, on a warm day like today. There was air-conditioning at the nearby Pleasance Cavern, but apparently no such luxury here.

And the place was almost full. At the Fringe, so heavily attended by backpackers and students, cut-price tickets do it every time. Miranda, Cassie and myself squeezed into three folding-chairs halfway up, I took the aisle seat on account of my long legs. Daniel and Ritch found places in the row behind me.

We just had time to settle down before the usher closed the door, a spotlight came on.

And the show began.



Without preamble—I didn't even notice the curtains at the back of the small stage move—the same figure who'd first handed me the flyer stepped into the concentrated pool of light. At least, I must *assume* it was the same figure. No sure way of telling, really. It could have been pretty much anyone, dressed like that.

It was thin black cloth, the costume he was wearing. Like a ninja out of old Japan.

Not a scrap of flesh showed. There were two small holes cut for the eyes. But oddly, I could detect no glint from them, even in the bright stage lighting.

Ninjas used to wear black gauze there, I remembered, to prevent that happening and betraying them. And was that what this man had used? I was too far away to be sure.

Something *else* was glinting though. Behind him, to the left, against the black drapes at the rear, I could just make out a random pile of objects. And...maybe it was the spotlight which had brought them into dim relief, because I hadn't noticed them before. Miscellaneous shapes. Some large. All inter-twisted. I struggled to make them out.

Was that...a circular saw?

Was that...a pair of bolt-cutters?

Was that a scimitar?

Was that an axe?

Chopper said nothing. Made no introduction. Gave no bow. Simply reached down to his waist and—wholly unexpectedly—yanked the top half of his costume off. The gloves remained in place, and the mask. But we all now found ourselves looking at a broad, well-defined chest.

I was so bound up with details, I've forgotten to describe him—so far as you can describe anybody dressed the way he was. He had to be somewhere between five-seven and five



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nine. Wide-shouldered but with terribly small feet. Short legs for a man of his height, so that his build looked almost like an old-time spinning top. His whole frame extremely muscular, compact. The build of a man who has been doing the right workout for an awfully long time.

His skin gleamed faintly in the spotlight. It had to be pretty hot down there.

No way of determining his age—but none of the thick hair on his chest had greyed-out; I could see *that* much.

And no way of telling what his face was like, of course.

He just took a backward step towards the pile of objects I had recently become aware of. Reached down towards it without even looking. His hand came back clutching the circular saw.

He switched it on. Its buzzing filled the theatre and Miranda gave a jerk.

And then he proceeded to shave his chest with it.

Miranda buried her face in her hands, along with several other members of the audience. And Cassie? She gripped my arm a little tighter, but was chuckling between clenched teeth. Most of the crowd seemed caught between those two reactions—revulsion and fright at what they were now seeing, but amusement too.

It was a trick. It simply *had* to be. No flecks of blood appeared. And the curly hairs didn't seem to be ripped out in any way.

I found myself trying to figure out how it was done. Probably, his chest was already shaven. These were false ones,

lightly stuck on. And when he moved the saw across them, they simply got knocked loose.

Bizarre, though. He was getting the bright, spinning blade awfully close to his skin. Or perhaps that was just another trick, one of perspective and angle.

He finally switched it off and put it down to limited applause.

During the course of the next twenty minutes, he continued by doing the following things.

He shaved his armpits with the scimitar.

He closed the blades of the bolt-cutters—it turned out he had two of them - around his covered earlobes and then walked around with them depending as though they were jewellery.

He produced a length of chain, attached it to a hook that was lowered from the ceiling, and then hanged himself with it, apparently with no damage or discomfort.

Then he started driving nine-inch nails right through the palms of his gloved hands. He didn't use a hammer. Simply forced them through himself.

No one got up and left, although a few, like Miranda, now had their heads almost buried in their laps. Cassie was clutching onto me extremely tightly by this time—something I was not ungrateful for—but smiling stiffly all the same.

"I wonder how on earth he does it?"

Fake blood? Obviously. Trick nails with rubber tips? I still couldn't work out how he'd hanged himself without the aid of a protective collar, but was certain of one thing. This was essentially no different from an old-fashioned magician with a pack of cards, a hat, a rabbit.

Props and misdirection—that was all.

Startling. But just a show.

Ritch, ever the cynic, leant across my shoulder at that point and murmured, "'Entertainer with a difference' eh? I've seen this kind of act at least half a dozen times before."

And... I could have sworn that Chopper glanced up, right in our direction, as he said it.

I almost felt him grin beneath that flimsy mask, although I couldn't see it.

He stopped what he was doing. Simply walked to the front edge of the stage. And—for the first time since he had appeared—began to address us.

1 1 1

"Are you enjoying yourselves, ladies, gents?"

A nervous laugh went up from the whole audience. Were we glad that it was merely a rhetorical question—had it not been, then how'd we have answered?

Chopper's voice was...well, surprising is the word. Possibly the most surprising thing of this entire show thus far, so little did it match with his appearance. It was medium-pitched, rather than the baritone that you might have expected. Fluid, almost silky, every word clearly enunciated. A cultured voice, one that hinted at education, maybe even breeding.

A...gentleman's voice?

He stood a little taller.

"But, since I am a mind-reader as well as a performance artist, I can tell what some of you have running through your thoughts by now. You're thinking: 'This is all interesting enough...'"

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And I was sure he glanced at Ritch and myself again.  
“...but surely nothing new’. And yes, I’ll admit that I’ve had nothing quite unique to offer, up until this point. But how many performers of my ilk, I ask you...”

And he spread his arms out wide theatrically, encompassing us all.

“...let the audience join in?”

There was just stunned silence for an elastic, nerveless moment.

And then? Almost everybody burst out laughing.

It wasn’t a comfortable hilarity, though. You could *feel* the electric tension that was now spreading between us, the air becoming damp with sweat. I could have sworn the already-high temperature went up another few degrees.

‘Join in’? Was that meant the way it sounded? What exactly was he going to do?

But in the very next moment, he was pointing at a tall, red-headed man in the front row.

“You, sir. Yes, you. You look like a courageous fellow.”

His friends, seated around him, started chuckling and snorting.

“How would you react, I wonder, if I were to suddenly do this?”

He backtracked quickly to his pile of tools. Whipped out from it some kind of big stiletto, the blade around a foot long. Then suddenly burst into a sprint, leaping off the stage.

And plunged the thing directly through the centre of tall man’s chest.

The women round him let out shrieks and clasped their hands to their mouths. All the male friends stiffened.

The red-headed man...was perfectly immobile for a moment. Then pitched forwards till his head was rested on his knees.

Several people guffawed at that point. I could see why – it was quite obvious. The guy was a ‘plant’, an accomplice, all the ‘friends’ around him actors. What was the point of this, though? I began to wonder. Where was it all leading?

While I was still trying to figure that out, Chopper returned to the stage and got an air-powered nail-gun, and then pointed at a brunette woman three rows down from myself, also on the aisle.

“You, madam? Would you like a try?”

She began shaking her head, though she was laughing at the same time.

“Oh, c’mon!” He had jumped down again. “You should at least try it once.”

Quite a few people, Ritch and Daniel included, were in stitches by this time. ‘*Schadenfreude*’ is the German term for it – pleasure or amusement at somebody else’s discomfort. Even the woman’s boyfriend was grinning, rubbing at her shoulder in a warm, supportive way.

And, while he was doing this, Chopper simply marched right up the stairs towards her. Held the gun at point-blank range, beside her temple.

There was a *pfzzt*, and then quickly a second one.

And the woman dropped sideways into her boyfriend’s lap, two nails protruding from her forehead, little streaks of blood there.

Applause rang out from a few sections of the theatre. Not from me, though. I was still trying to understand where all of this was headed.

And that was when the black clad figure – merely yards away now – looked directly up at me.

And I finally understood what the deal was with his eyes.

† † †

There was no gauze. There was nothing at all covering them. They were very small and very narrow, as tiny as I’d ever seen a pair. The irises were large, and left no room for anything else.

They were pure black, so you could not make out where they stopped and the pupil started.

And they had no lustre whatsoever.

Utterly dead eyes.

I felt chilled to the bone, gazing into them.

And then I sensed him smile again, beneath his mask.

And heard him ask me, “You, sir? How about you?”

† † †

Now? He is going back onto the stage and fetching the axe from the pile. Hefting it, so that its newly-honed blade sparkles. Coming back towards me, his black gaze locked on my face.

His isn’t the only one. Every single person in the theatre is staring at me now. Ritch has just reached down and given me an encouraging pat on the shoulder. Cassie is clutching my sleeve and giggling furiously, her eyes damp and her face bright red. Miranda has her head buried in her lap again, but even she is looking at me sideways, out of just one eye.

And I keep on trying to reassure myself – ‘it’s all fake, it’s just a show’.

Except...there’s what I told myself before. Illusion. Misdirection. Making things seem one way when the truth is actually something else.

And...if a madman wanted to kill people...wanted them to let him...

Wanted them to sit there smiling, actually going along with it, while he butchered them one by one...

Is there a sharp, coppery smell on the theatre’s air by this time? The brunette’s boyfriend shaking her, starting to look concerned?

“Don’t lose your head, Ian!” Daniel is chortling. Everybody laughs at that.

I could try and wrestle the axe off Chopper, for sure. Or I could get up and run – there is a fire exit behind me, I noticed it when we first came in. But I’d be doing either thing to the incredulous hilarity of the crowd. To my friends’ dismay, astonishment. To the loss of Cassie’s respect, affection, and even her love.

So many eyes on me. So many smiling faces.

So I try and drive that second theory right out of my mind, and reassure myself it’s just a show, even though I still can’t understand its point.

He is coming towards me now, his dark and unreflective eyes fixed upon mine.

And there doesn’t seem to be a thing that I can do about it...



# A Conversation with

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## RICHARD MATHESON

conducted by William P. Simmons

A WRITER WHO brought believability and a conscience to speculative and dark fiction early in his career as a short story writer and screenwriter, Richard Matheson, the man, has continued to evolve no less rapidly (and with just as much heart) as his characters—men and women whose battles against a largely hostile world and their own struggling perceptions of Self result in either transformation or defeat. Ushering in a new age of literary fear and dark fantasy with his first published story, “Born Of Man And Woman,” which instantly made him a publishing success, Matheson took the art of fear from the Gothic castles and battlements of its melodramatic ancestry and placed it in the modern American home. Matheson’s monsters were just as often human as they were supernatural, and his subsequent novels and stories exhibited characters struggling with their hearts and morals no less than with physical adversaries such fearsome beasts as one another.

Called “one of the most important writers of the 20th century” by Ray Bradbury, Matheson inspired other notable authors, including Stephen King, who cited Matheson as “the author who influenced me most as a writer.” A writer in love with words and the aesthetic power of storytelling, Matheson has refused to limit his imagination and creative efforts to any one subject or approach. In addition to his novels of mystery, science fiction, horror, fantasy, and the western, he has long been an influential writer of film and television. Working during “the Golden Age of Television,” he contributed fourteen of arguably the most beloved episodes of Rod Serling’s *Twilight Zone*, including “The Invaders,” “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet,” and “Little Girl Lost,” cementing his status as a cultural icon. With his late friend and fellow writer Charles Beaumont, he wrote several episodes of other popular

dramas as well, including scripts for *Have Gun, Will Travel*, *Night Gallery*, and *Star Trek*. He later went on to work with B-picture pioneer Roger Corman and AIP pictures, contributing to the silver screen such macabre efforts as *THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER*, *THE COMEDY OF TERRORS*, *BURN WITCH BURN* (again with Beaumont), and several other landmarks of cinematic terror and adventure.

In the meantime, Matheson continued to write novels that changed the face of fiction with his trademark minimalist style, philosophical themes, and brazenly original re-workings of universal fears and fancies. Such novels as *The Shrinking Man* (filmed as *THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN* in 1957), *I Am Legend* (filmed twice, poorly), and *Bid Time Return* (filmed as *SOMEWHERE IN TIME*) have become part of the national language, adopted into the cultural consciousness. Adapting several of his short pieces for television as well as film, constantly stretching his creative muscles, Matheson was also responsible for some of the finest fantastical moments on the television screen, including “Prey,” the killer doll opus that raised the hackles of an entire generation in the made-for-television Dan Curtis production, *TRILOGY OF TERROR*, and *THE NIGHT STALKER*, the later of which drew around 75 million viewers on its original broadcast. While Matheson is known primarily for his work in terror, fantasy, and science fiction, it should also be acknowledged that he was the writer behind *The Morning After* and several highly readable books on metaphysics, including *A Primer of Reality* and *The Path*.

Born in New Jersey in 1926, Matheson has lived and worked in California since 1951. His career, spanning five decades, has earned him numerous awards, including the World Fantasy Convention’s Life Achievement Award, the Bram Stoker Award for Life Achieve-

ment, the Hugo Award, the Edgar Allan Poe Award, the Golden Spur Award, and the Writer’s Guild Award. But it’s his words that count most, not his awards, not even his reputation. The energy and passion, the meaning and philosophy inherent in his lean, emotionally poignant narratives merge surface entertainment with intellectual substance, challenging reader’s views of life, Self, and the afterlife. He is, in short, the real deal.

2004 and 2005 will see publication of several new Matheson projects, including *Darker Places*, a collection of horror stories he wrote “to scare people,” and the scripts of *DUEL* and *THE DISTRIBUTOR* (a novelette reminiscent of Stephen King’s *Needful Things*). Also on the horizon is *Unrealized Dreams* a treasure of unreleased screenplays including *FANTASTIC LITTLE GIRL*, an unproduced sequel to *THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN*; *APPOINTMENT AT ZAHRAIN*, an unproduced vehicle which was to have starred Clark Gable; and *SWEETHEARTS AND HORRORS*, a screenplay which was to have starred Boris Karloff, Vincent Price, Peter Lorre, and Basil Rathbone. In 2005 Matheson will release *The Link*, a script treatment written in novel-like form, which was to have been a mini-series for ABC television, and lastly, an as-yet-untitled vampire omnibus which will include an adaptation of *Dracula* for Dan Curtis, a reprint of the novel *I Am Legend*, and a screenplay of the same. And, possibly, a short novel written by Matheson when he was fourteen years old.

One thing is for certain. No matter which aesthetic form or genre he chooses to explore, Richard Matheson belongs to no one form of fiction, owes allegiance to no single form. Having contributed to practically every genre, he is beholden to none. He is, in short, a writer’s writer. An author as capable of sharing his philosophical views on metaphysics

as he is of crafting everyday characters struggling against themselves or the supernatural.

Richard Matheson, story teller.



**CD** Later this year Gauntlet Press is releasing your screenplay of *DUEL*. How does your screenplay differ from Spielberg's film?

**RM** It doesn't. I had more voice-overs in my script, that's all. Except for that, it followed my script really well.

**CD** How do you feel about the several films that have been made from your fiction? Have they for the most part remained true to your stories?

**RM** No. *SOMEWHERE IN TIME* is the closest—that follows my script very closely, and I was very happy with it. *STIR OF ECHOS*, last year, with David Koopp, followed my story line very closely though he updated it. I think it is an excellent film. And most of the Poe films followed my scripts as well.

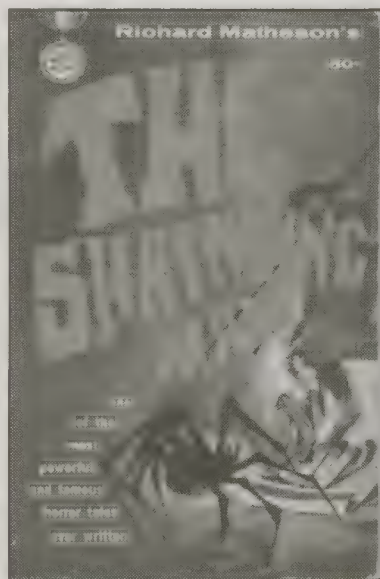
**CD** While you initially faced the same difficulty as anyone else when first trying to enter the world of screen writing, I believe you broke through when you forced the producers who wanted to option *The Shrinking Man* to let you write the script.

**RM** Yes, because I waited until *they* wanted my novel! There are other ways to do it now, but back then I think that was the best way. My book was not called the *Incredible Shrinking Man* (as it is often referred to), it was just called *The Shrinking Man*. The phrase *Incredible Shrinking* has become part of the American language. I just saw it in *Weekly Variety* yesterday.

**CD** In other words the producer added it to the title.

**RM** Yes. My feeling is, it's already pretty incredible that a guy is shrinking! Why add the adjective?

**CD** In your screenplay *THE DISTRIBUTOR* (based on your novella of the same name), a man whom we know nothing about moves into a neighbor-



hood and through manipulation pits neighbor against neighbor, leaving to do the same elsewhere when he has accomplished the chaos he desires. What was your interest in writing this story?

**RM** It was a *Playboy* novelette at first. It has never been made into a movie and my screenplay has never been used, and at one point a writer wrote a speculative script and that was not made either. When I wrote the story, I just thought it would be interesting to do a story of an evil that wasn't going to be identified. The evil was going to be approached in such a banal everyday way. Nothing supernatural or mysterious about it. The protagonist just methodically demolishing the neighborhood.



**CD** Gauntlet Press is releasing a collection of your unreleased screenplays entitled *Unrealized Dreams*. Included in this book is *FANTASTIC LITTLE GIRL*, a sequel to *THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN*. Why did you write a sequel? What did you feel you had left to say regarding this story?

**RM** They paid me for it. They had all these sets and props. The picture made a lot much money. They wanted to do a sequel. I don't know why they didn't film it.

**CD** How did you feel regarding the film version of *THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN*?

**RM** For years I didn't like it. It was not appropriate, I thought. But over the years I realized that it was very unusual for its time. The ending, the whole approach, was unusual. And, actually, it's excellent. Grant Williams did a bang up job playing the man.

**CD** *Unrealized Dreams*, from Gauntlet Press, also includes *APPOINTMENT AT ZAHRAIN*. Can you describe the basic premise of this screenplay, which you purportedly wrote with Clark Gable in mind?

**RM** I wrote it for Paramount, and the director of *THE YOUNG LIONS*. It never worked out but they did make a different version of it later on. It was supposed to be Clark Gable's next film. If he hadn't died of a heart attack after straining himself on *THE MISFITS*, he probably would have made it.

**CD** Describe the premise of *SWEET HEARTS AND HORRORS*, the script you wrote for Boris Karloff, Peter Lorre, and Vincent Price, which will also appear in *Unrealized Dreams*.

**RM** That was going to be a sort of sequel to *COMEDY OF TERRORS*. Actually, more like a follow-up than a sequel. I think it is a very good script. I wanted to add Tallulah Bankhead into the group, which would have been marvelous. She appeared in a Hammer Film I wrote that they called—yuk—*DIE, DIE, MY DARLING!*

**CD** Was it to be another AIP production?

**RM** I think so. It may be around the time that Jim Nicholson died, I don't know for sure.

**CD** In 2005, Gauntlet will be publishing a screen treatment of yours called *The Link*, a teleplay that was intended as a 20-hour miniseries for ABC, written in a narrative-like format.

**RM** I worked a year and a half on that outline. It was over 800 pages long and in narrative form. Barry Hoffman is actually printing the outline. At one point I started to novelize it and got about 600-700 pages into it, and never finished it. Barry decided that the outline was the complete story, so he decided to publish that.

**CD** Why didn't you finish it?

**RM** Because my agent said we'd have to charge \$50 for the book! It might be many thousand pages long! So I just gave it up.

**CD** Does *The Link* explore similar metaphysical speculations and beliefs as *What Dreams May Come* and *Come Fygyres, Come Shadowes*? How does it differ from your other metaphysical material?

**RM** They are all different aspects. *What Dreams May Come* is about life after death. *Come Fygyres, Come Shadowes* is about spiritualism.

**CD** So where would *The Link* fit in?

**RM** *The Link* was supposed to cover every aspect of the metaphysical, which it does, but I had to take and lift out some of the pieces, and Cemetery Dance published that with the title *Mediums Rare*. Barry has asked them if he can use it in *The Link*, and they said okay. My idea was to cover the entire field of metaphysics starting with the Fox sisters back in 1840 and periodically dramatize sequences of various psychic events in the past along with every aspect of parapsychological investigation in the modern world.

**CD** In 2005, Gauntlet is also releasing an omnibus of your vampire fiction, including the novel *I Am Legend* and its unproduced screenplay. What was your opinion of *THE LAST MAN ON*



*EARTH* and *THE OMEGA MAN*, both rather lackluster films that were based on your novel?

**RM** I was disappointed in *THE LAST MAN ON EARTH*, even though they more or less followed my story. I think Vincent Price, whom I love in every one of his pictures that I wrote, was miscast. I also felt the direction was kind of poor. I just didn't care for it. *THE OMEGA MAN* was so removed from my book that it didn't even bother me! I was told at one time that Charlton Heston had managed to interest Sam Peckinpah in directing. That could have really been something special.

**CD** Why wasn't your screenplay for *I Am Legend* ever produced?

**RM** Well, I was working for Hammer films and I went over to London and stayed at a hotel there and wrote the script. When it wasn't made I felt "well, they just didn't like it," but it turned out that wasn't the case. It was the censor. The censor had just allowed them to squeeze by with their *FRANKENSTEIN* and their *DRACULA*, and the British were very strong on censorship so my script which follows the book, so they said no way, and so they had to finally sell it to a producer in the United States.

**CD** Your adaptation of *Dracula*, which will also appear in the Gauntlet collection of your vampire material, was the first which stayed rather faithful to Stoker's novel.

**RM** That's right. All the others followed the Broadway play. I don't know if it was shot in three hours, but it should have been. They had enough material.

**CD** Did you feel intimidated at all dealing with what is considered a classic of Gothic fiction?

**RM** No, I just thought "well, no one's ever done the book. I think I'll do the book!" And Dan Curtis did an excellent job directing it.

**CD** Coming soon from Gauntlet Press, *Darker Places* is a collection of horrific stories, novellas, and the unproduced screenplay from John Saul's *Creature*. Why did they go unpublished until now?

**RM** I wrote them some time ago and they just never sold. They are not bad, I reread them. They're not bad!

**CD** In your Introduction to *Darker Places* you state that, "psychologically—and I hope spiritually—I am opposed to such writing now" in reference to horror fiction. Why?

**RM** Because I don't think that the idea of it being vicarious is correct. I think that when people are exposed to it, it gets in their brain and stays there. I don't think it's just a vicarious pleasure and then they forget about it. I think it roots itself in their psyches.

**CD** And if it does? Why do you feel that would be damaging?

**RM** Because it's terrifying! If you go around consciously or subconsciously thinking about vampires and ghouls and crypts and graves and ghosts, you have a problem.

**CD** So you don't believe the negative aspects of existence deserve to be explored along with the positive?

**RM** Well, terror is a venerable form of literature. I'm not putting it down. I've done it myself. I just don't feel like I want to do it anymore. I have no interest whatever now in terror or horror. I never liked horror in the first place.

**CD** Humankind is no stranger to violence. We're a violent spe-

cies. And art of course reflects this, one need only look to the tragedies of Shakespeare to see violence, terror, and depravity as an important dimension of human experience.

**RM** Well, nobody is going to imitate *Macbeth* today. Nobody's going to look for a king and kill him. You're right though, it's been all throughout history. As I said, terror and horror are venerable genres that have existed from way back when, and I'm certainly not going to say that "oh no, they shouldn't exist!" You can hardly do that. But I never liked horror. As for the horror films today, they are so gross. They are hideously gross!

**CD** How so? And what do you think this suggests about our culture?

**RM** The fact that they make a lot of money, that the young people go and say "hey, cool!" I think that's awful! It's just my personal opinion, based on my metaphysical beliefs. As I said, I think that these things root themselves in the soul, and I think you can't get them out that easily. At the same time, I don't denounce what I have done in the past. I was very good at writing scary stuff. And when I was young, I got a kick out of writing that kind of stuff.

**CD** How did you react to your dark fiction back then?

**RM** Back then I would tend to burst out into laughter! When you are young, this happens. As time goes by your philosophy changes...and if it doesn't change, emotionally and psychologically, as you get older, then you are really in trouble.

**CD** If you feel dark fiction is so very dangerous to the psyche, why allow collections like *Darker Places* to be published?

**RM** Good question. Morally I shouldn't publish it. But I don't think the stories are viscerally horrible.

**CD** You're no stranger to people telling you how much they enjoy your work. How do you feel about this kind of attention?

**RM** Good. Of course good. It helps—it really does—when

people say "I really like your work!" But I used to know this kid who went "Ooooh, I love your scary stuff! Give us more vampires, werewolves, and ghouls! And I thought, "Go get a life!"

**CD** Have you often found yourself pigeon-holed or characterized in a particular genre by critics?

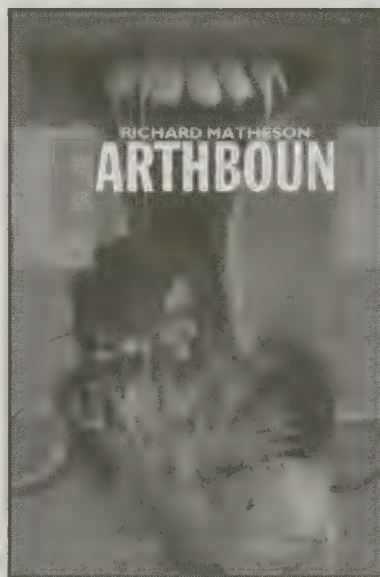
**RM** Of course. Putting somebody in a category or sticking them in a box is something they just do all the time. I've said that when I die they will probably say "Horrormeister Richard Matheson succumbs."

**CD** For instance, you weren't too happy when you were referred to as "The Hemmingway of Horror" in a *Publishers Weekly* book review, were you?

**RM** No, I've written a number of other things that had nothing to do with horror. I wrote a really wonderful script called *THE MORNING AFTER*, about alcoholism, with Dick Van Dyke. And I wrote an excellent script about Frank Baum, called *THE DREAMER OF OZ* with John Ritter.

**CD** And your first novel, *Hunger and Thirst*, which was only published a few years ago.

**RM** Oh yes! I'll tell you, that book was setting in the back of a filing cabinet for so many years. I wrote that way back when—after I got out of college—and my agent at the time said "you know, this is un-publishable."



And I've never been that confident in my work, so I put it away. Then my son Richard said "Why don't you show it to Barry?" So I reread it and thought "my god that's not bad!" I sent it to Barry and he liked it. Well, he published it anyway. A great cover, too, by Harry Morris.

**CD** Moving on, how would you say that you identify with your characters?

**RM** Pretty much the main character is always me. The man in *I Am Legend* is me. The man in *The Shrinking Man*, that's me. *Stir Of Echos*, that's me. *What Dreams May Come*, me.

**CD** You empathize with your creations very much, then.

**RM** I not only empathize, I'm it. When I'm writing, especially when I'm writing in first person, I don't think about the characterization, or how they are going to express themselves, I just express my own approach to these things. I think most writers can never divorce themselves from their private lives and personas; they are the ones that are writing. And the more they remove themselves from their own persona, the more, perhaps, mechanical the work becomes.

**CD** What do you feel is the most important aspect of writing?

**RM** I had only written a couple of stories when Robert Bloch wrote a wonderful article about me. And in fact it floored me! I didn't even know that he knew me or had read anything by me. And the thing that he emphasized was honesty. That's been my major approach.

**CD** Give us an example?

**RM** Sometimes people are shocked by *Hellhouse* at the violence and sexuality. My answer is, well, that's what the story called for. If I write a story about Frank Baum writing *The Wizard of Oz*, then that's what I'm writing about. I'm writing about his personality and what he has done with his life. I'm honestly trying to let the shoe fit.

**CD** Throughout a monumental, dare I say legendary career, what would you say has been your greatest disappointment?

**RM** That I did not finish these two novels I mentioned earlier. And that they did not use my script for *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*. I'm also sorry that I wrote *The Distributor*, because when it was published in *Playboy*, a lot of crazy people started doing to their neighbors what I had my neighbors doing. I wrote about this in article for *The Times*. Later I also found out that some teacher somewhere got fired because she was teaching her class *Hell House...* and that I don't like at all! I was also told, that some publisher down in South America somewhere that the dictator was named Basco, and so he thought the book was an attack on him. They put the editor in jail. And I thought "Oh God! That's horrible."

**CD** Did you blame yourself for *The Distributor*?

**RM** No, I don't. A writer can always say "listen, that's just a story...but I don't always believe that's true...as I said, I don't believe terror and horror are just vicarious pleasures. I think it roots itself in your mind. It can

affect your mind. Look at what's going on in the country today. The violence is just awful and I think a lot of has to do with what they are showing on the movies and television.

**CD** What work has brought you the greatest reward?

**RM** I received a number of letters from people who read *What Dreams May Come* that said, "My mother was dying and terrified, but she read your book and now feels very much at peace." And I think "ah that's wonderful!" No writer can get more than that. So that's a really positive thing. That's why I wrote the metaphysical books, which I wish I could get out there better for people to read.

**CD** Your later work seems often to emphasize elements of family, am I correct?

**RM** Very much so. As I said in the introduction to the collection of short stories that Gauntlet's printing, you can see my mentality change in the

stories which I published in chronological order. In my earlier stories, when I lived by myself in Brooklyn, marriage was like some frightening phenomenon to me. It did not turn out well in my stories. Then I came to California, met my wife, fell in love, and got married. So after that scary things happened to the man and his wife. Then we had children. And that changed my attitude even more. Scary things now happened to me, my wife, and my children. They became a part of my life. Every writer, I think, only profits by being married and having a family.

**CD** Is there anything else you would care to share on this subject?

**RM** To get married and have a family, is to grow up and mature. It's the only way. You can read philosophy books for a hundred years, but if you don't get married and have a family you will never get it. They soften you and shape you, mature you. Absolutely.



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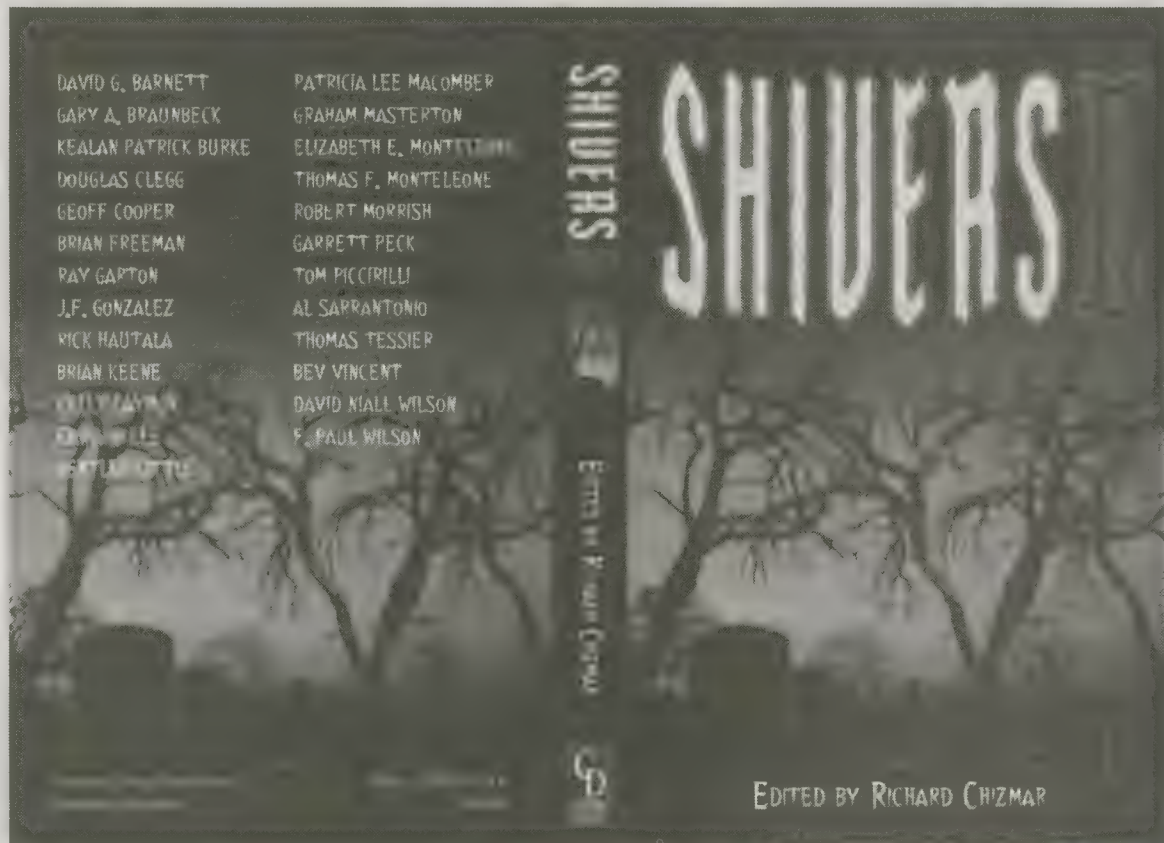
He is not a bad dream. He is not a hallucination. Dr. Furgeson, who once traumatized a trusting little boy named Stuart, has returned to perform the same nightmarish procedure on Stuart's son James. And he's brought along his scissors...*Snick-snick-snick... snick-snick-snick.*

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# SIGNAL TO NOISE

Gerard Houarner

GERARD HOUARNER is a Bronx resident and counselor at a psychiatric hospital. Look for his recent work in *City Slab*, *Underworlds*, *Flesh and Blood*, *The Damned*, *Mojo: Conjure Stories*, as well as in *Dead Cat's Traveling Circus of Wonders and Miracle Medicine Show*, illustrated and co-edited by GAK, which will also feature work by some other CD contributors. More is always on the way. For the latest, check [www.cith.org/gerard](http://www.cith.org/gerard)

The question isn't: Are you insane?

It's not an unfair question, not for a guy living in an abandoned building who thinks roaches tickle and knows first hand the rats are too damned fast for the stew. "You went to college?" your last girlfriend asks, like it's a crime and she can collect a reward if she turns you in. "If you paid attention you could be supervising the place," your boss says, only you messed up the last shipment and the real dock supervisor is laughing because you're just not any competition. "Daddy when are you going to visit," your daughter demands, because she hasn't seen you since Christmas and she's still holding that Father's Day present and the support payments are coming out of the check smooth as silk but that doesn't matter to the kid because you're not there and she isn't hearing what you're hearing—let's count our blessings on that one—and the ex-wife isn't explaining any problems you might be having which on the whole is another blessing to be counted. Your wife wasn't the first to ask that question, by the way, so let's be real and not put it to her too hard because after all you did jam your head into the television screen and almost electrocute yourself with a radio in the shower and refuse to take the pills the doctor on her medical plan put you on because the transmissions still came through only scarier and there was no trusting what could happen to you or the wife or the girl if fear actually upset the checks and balances in your life. What comes in from outside the head is actually much safer than the things bubbling underneath all the noise.

But there are reasons.

The channels are filled with overlapping broadcasts. Too many signals crowding into your head. The powerful stations you grow up with, Mom and Dad, brothers and sisters, aunt, uncles and grandparents, blast the songs of the norm, the pop tunes you're supposed to hum to get through the day when you're an adult. You're tuned in, though not turned on and definitely not dropped out. No, you're in the middle of the mix, watching and listening and tasting and feeling the family show that's on twenty-four/seven in every inch of space of a very nice Tudor. You pay attention, because you're the youngest, the mistake, the one they forget, except when it comes time to sacrifice, and if you miss picking up on the signals you might get hurt.

Again. Worse than last time.

You're very good at getting the messages. Looking back, it's like there's a secret receptor inside you, isn't it? A whole other

organ nobody else has, or maybe there's a part of the brain that processes the sensory input differently from everyone else.

It's not because you're insane.

People are broadcasting, loud and clear. They're singing songs and jingles they want you to hear and understand: obey me, fear me, love me. So you dance on the living room rug, boogie in the bathroom and rumba in the bedroom to the band's jive, while in the background there's just a hint of interference or a dash of static, or maybe it's deejay patter and they don't know the mike is on. There's the buzz of anger in the air, a hive of stirred-up hornets. There are lusts too big for your little boy body, and they overflow and leave you dirty and tired and confused because those feelings contradict the good little boy message you've been getting.

Maybe someone screams, a bottle gets thrown and glass breaks, flesh slaps against flesh. There's weeping behind a closed door, and whispers coming from the bathroom, and upstairs there's a herd of buffalo trampling a Native the tribe sent out to see if the spirits will protect him because he ain't quite right in the head, and in the next room metal is squeaking and someone is moaning and you're thinking there's a doctor in the house because someone's getting an injection and you hope you're not next in line for an operation. The cats hide from everybody, it isn't just you. Other, older people get to walk to the dog, and they're always walking the dog, the dog never stays in the house, and you never see the dog, you don't even remember his name. You get to know who's taken a shit or a piss by the smell in the hall, and the aroma of boiled cabbage and regret always trails the old folks who live in the basement, and the young ones choke you with either their sweetness or musk but definitely their contempt. These are the daily shows, live and unrehearsed, the ones that carve the real from the unknown with the greatest hits of your life: get good grades and listen to Mom and Dad, do what I say or I'll tell Mom and Dad what's under the mattress, come over here and sit on my lap it's all right if you fidget.

Really, you are like everyone else.

Time goes by and stations go off the air. The broadcasting network is broken up—mergers, acquisitions, divestitures—and suddenly the Tudor is gone, and the old folks, and Mom or Dad, it's hard to tell one from the other, their play lists are so similar. The places where the songs of the norm fill up the tank that makes the engine go every day are gone: the little school, the small store with a soda fountain, the restaurant where every special occasion is celebrated, the clinic with the very nice nurses and lollipop after every visit.

There's a new neighborhood, this thing they call an apartment, in a city, and a new school, and strangers, and enemies. There's lunch money to surrender, and blind-side fists, and jokes about the retard. There's too much noise, the signals are mixed, it's thunder and lightning all the time, and that's just half of what's going on. Garbage and puke on the sidewalk,

sirens and horns and engines gunning, dazzling girls who could lay you flat if they ever smiled in your direction but of course never would. Guys who do smile, and offer treats, and other things. There's buses and subways tossing people around, cabs and cars and trucks running down the prey. A million people sweating and eating and talking, knowing and pretending to know, yelling, laughing. Or silent as torpedoes waiting to be launched.

The last few strong stations you grew up with get blocked. In the valleys between the tall buildings, in the crater shadows where the noon sun is afraid to shine, the stations change, and some signals, local, pirate, come in louder and clearer than others. There's no choosing, just listening. Someone's looking for a fix. Somebody else owes money to the wrong kind of people. This job sucks, why does she get all the attention, what an asshole, and so on and so on...

Maybe you try to remember those old pop tunes you grew up with, whistle a few bars in the dark, tap your feet while waiting in a subway station watching the rats play along the tracks. Maybe the beat picks up as strangers ask for a dime or a dollar or whatever the fuck you got in your pocket motherfucker, or the chords turn from major to minor and even diminished as the cops ask what are you doing out of school or don't bother listening as a sad story unfurls and lays limp from your hurt and indignation, or the old familial melody line trips and falls and suddenly there's a new tune sinking its hooks into a soft spot rubbed raw by the rough truth that the band has changed

and the frequency jumped and the station is under new management.

There are tape recorders and CDs, but let's face it, they don't carry the finger-popping numbers we're talking about. You are the radio, you are the receiver, always turned on, taking in whatever's being broadcast, so deal with it.

Keeping to those old dance steps doesn't always work. Shuffle and jump, learn a new boogie, twist those hips and bop that head. Shake to the jive your mamma taught you because that's the one the teacher wants to see, and the token booth clerk, and the guy in the candy store, and security guards at the school door. But add a little something, or take a lot away, stay off the damn beat and syncopate, when others block the way down the stairwell or become hounds to your fox in the alleys and side streets and empty lots and abandoned buildings.

It all comes down to what kind of Muzak is playing in the elevator you happen to be riding. Going up, down, or stuck between floors, there's only the old steps or, with a little luck, time to learn a couple of new ones to get you through the ride.

Do the best you can.

The question isn't: Are you insane? So don't ask it.

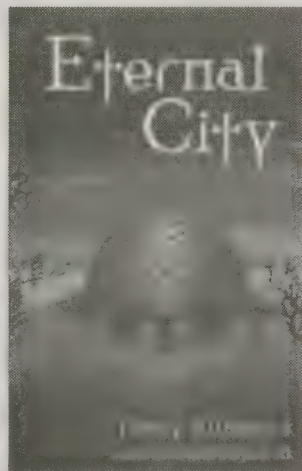
A brain walks into a bar and says, "Let me have a shot of whiskey." The bartender looks at him and says, "No way, get the hell out of my place." "Why?" the brain asks. "You're already out of your fucking head."

That's an old joke. It's not funny. You see me laughing?

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---

I heard them all. So have you. Especially the ones where you are the punch line. Because we pay attention. No choice. Can't help it. Nobody gets that, people misunderstand. Got nothing to do with sanity or insanity. The receiver doesn't shut off and the controls are shot and the program guide offers interesting options but is of absolutely no value. It's like we're waiting for a repairman to come fix the volume slide and the tuning dial and the power switch. Or a voice to come on air to answer to questions like why is this happening to me, why can't I be like other people, why can't I concentrate, how come I babble when I talk, who are these people in my head, why can't I have any peace? Wouldn't it be cool if this was actually a two-way situation where you could send a response like: I don't need to see/hear/feel all of this, give me a break, just shut up.

It's not quite that simple.

So you listen because there's no other choice, and the big picture gets lost and quite a few of the details in that picture, too, so it's hard to put things together or follow a plan or keep a commitment or even understand what's going on at any given moment. Things were much simpler when there was just the major broadcasting stations and a little sun spot activity every now and then to spoil the reception. Now there's just so much going on and the only simple thing to do is to let it all go through you, let it all pass by, because trying to make sense of it all is just too much work and—

Interlude. A break. Everybody deserves one. You have yours. She sees through the school daze. And around her, your hearing clears up. Hormones are pumping full blast. Maybe that helps clear out some of the noise. Your body's broadcasting to your brain, the music is loud and clear and urgent and specific, the gene pool has stood up and shouted, it's time to make a stand and be counted. She doesn't mind when you stare off at nothing, drawn to the background hiss of the universe, the cosmic radiation of information and theory and judgement. The hits just keep on coming. The kid survives being alone with you, which is, you have to admit, a minor miracle by itself. Number one with a bullet. You get a job, and don't lose it, and maybe everything's going to work out, the chemicals in your brain are settling into a comfortable mix, like the songs running through your head about moving out of the city and having another kid and going back to finish college and forgetting all about the jams you're still picking up, slow and fast and hot and funky and hardcore and head slamming and—

Bam. Kill the hit parade. The alarm sounds and there's a moment of silence and instead of a voice saying this was only a test of the Emergency Broadcasting System, there it is. An answer. Beaming straight through you, out of the blue, steady and clear, the voice of an angel, a perfect gift, and this pristine signal in a noiseless field burns, and it focuses the world so you see your place and purpose in life for a terrifying instant, and you know you need to pass this answer along like a leak you've been holding for way too long but not just to anybody, not to your wife or daughter or parents or the couple of friends you've actually earned since you started paying attention to details and big pictures. The answer has to go to the right person, it's your mission, your sacred duty, you're holding a revelation, a truth, an epiphany wrapped up in a gospel hymn, can you give me a hallelujah, and all that's needed is a particular question and all will be revealed and you really do just have to find that question because this answer is killing you—

Did you just overhear God?

That's not the question, so relax.

And the stations are back on the air bombarding you with this one's anxiety about being gay or straight and that other one's worry about getting the family cancer and somebody else's rage about being dumped and the answer just nests inside you like a parasite and says you have to listen, you really do, because the only way to get rid of the answer is to find the question it needs to complete, the problem it needs to solve.

The answer becomes the bridge between those be-bopping signals and the hook playing over and over in your head for so long with only a little time off for normal behavior: Are you insane? Yeah, there's still no consistent melody, everybody's off-key and off-tempo and doing everything from blues to opera to country, but in this day and age, a hook and bridge is all you need to make a hit. Everything else is just noise. Take it to the bridge, brothers and sisters,

But are you insane is still not the question.

And that's too bad, really. Because if it was, you could rest. Sit on a beach sipping an umbrella drink listening to the waves and *nothing else*. But you think, everybody's got questions. At least one. The smart ones should have lots. They're the ones you need. So you sit at cafes and restaurants and bars and listen to stupid, pseudo-intellectual debates about politics and philosophy; desperately heated arguments about love and abandonment; plain old juicy gossip. You spend time in museums and galleries, community board meetings and lectures with question and answer sessions; any place with the possibility of hearing a question you might not have already heard. You learn business people are much too guarded, artists are too self-involved, critics only know the questions they're taught. In the press of people, the ratio of noise to signal rises to an excruciating level.

The majority of people follow identical ruts of inquiry with numbing consistency. The homeless and the insane, they surprise, but ultimately disappoint. But even the underground transmissions you pick up on, even the questions people don't ask but wish they could, don't click. No one's come up with the right question. Yet.

When you get the question to the answer, then you got your own song. Hook, melody and bridge. And then—what?

That's not the question, either.

Sometimes, you think it might be easier if you used more direct methods to find the question. Carve it out of somebody, anybody, with a saw-cut above the brow, letting blood crawl over face, blinding the eyes, trying to pry open that mystical third eye, digging beneath the bone, excavating the useless matter of the brain to find the buried treasure that is the key to releasing the answer: the right question.

But no, no, no, we're not going there, that is violent and anti-social and definitely uncool, not music, not even an interpretation or an improvisational riff but sheer, unadulterated shock jock provocation, worse than the kind of mindless noodling you get when you stand too close to missionaries or politicians or a used car salesman.

Still, there's the germ of an idea in there, one you've already touched on in your life. Think of your marriage. That's right, there it is, let it out. For a while hormones and pheromones and biological imperatives ruled. You became the main station transmitting to yourself. Your own body was giving you the soundtrack of your life, not the big pop tune stations from the family or the mad bad city.

Bring that thought up the now, lower the bass, adjust the balance, listen to the lyrics. Really listen. Don't listen too deeply, go zen and start wondering if it's been you doing the broadcasting to yourself all along. That would make you insane, and we

know that's not the question, any more than it's the answer. No matter what they all say.

Here's the short and sweet: reach out and touch someone. No, not telephone solicitation. No, not praying to God, either.

Open your own pirate station. Ahoy matey. We have the technology. Everybody does. In fact, you've been putting out your own signal all along. It's just that everyone's sets are too low power, or insensitive, or just plain broken. Who pays attention to other people? The only reason you do is that you don't have a choice.

All you have to do is amp up the signal. Shout it out. Make them turn their heads, listen to the tunes they hum when they think no one's around, recognize what they've been sending out all these years. Use what you've got—a lifetime's worth of ditties and routines and numbers in the stacks. Whip them out and play them back, see if anybody dances to your tunes. Even give them a little taste of that answer you're holding like Atlas with the world on his shoulders. Not too much, just enough to get people wondering, thinking. Provoke the masses. Spread the joy. Make them want to shout right back at you.

See what kind of questions you get then.

Trust me. This can work.

Would I lie to you?

What do you mean, who am I? That's not the question. Though it's nice of you to ask. If you have to know, I'm the part of you that's a little worried about the dwindling ratio of signal to noise running through your head, lately. That answer is wearing you out. You're going to lose the job. Catch a disease. Or maybe get run over. You should have your own place, for crying out loud. You don't even play with your daughter. You don't eat right. Your gums bleed. It's disgusting.

I'm the guy made by and raised on the greatest hits in your head, the jam master deejay who's going to string some samples together and put them out there for people to hear inside their heads. Think of me as the sidekick, or a session player who comes to fill in a few background licks. Or maybe I'm the secret engineer. Or the real you, buried under the tons of thoughts and feelings.

Maybe I'm God.

Doesn't matter. Bottom line is there's just not much to me, in here. I'm basically useless, since I don't have the right question.

But I'm here for you. It's you and me, together, forever.

Why? What's in it for me?

That's not the question, either. But's still a good one.

And people say you're stupid.

Because I want to save this radio station, of course. I like the old school hits, the disco era ditties, even the punked-out hardcore extreme edge of an existence you're dancing on right now. If the city gets you, or that answer you're carrying, where am I going to get my fix of Mom and Dad, the wife when things were good, and that cute little kid who's going to grow up broken-hearted breaking hearts? They don't make records like that, anymore.

Besides, I don't have much of a choice. No matter who or what I am, if you go down, I've got no place to go. It's not like there's a lot of openings for secondary voices in people's heads. There's too many layers of nepotism to break through. Even if I am God.

We got a deal?

And people say you're crazy.

You won't regret this. Others might, but you won't.

Okay, let's get this party started.

Testing. Testing.

Here. Hear.

Listen up, out there. Here's a taste of the classic rock, the small town kid who went nuts in the big city—and maybe he was nuts all along, but who's counting? We got the re-mixes, they're all familiar, the fears and hopes, the joys and dreams of every last one of you, or at least every last one of you that's in spitting distance of us. Hearing voices? You better believe it. Let the heavens part and the angels sing. And what are they saying? That, you can't believe.

I bet you have some questions.

No, really, do you have a question? Call it in, all lines are open, there is no charge and our operator is waiting. Scream it out, sing along to the song of kings and gods and madmen, you know you can't help it, praise the Lord and pass the ammunition. God, if you're listening, don't be shy and don't be a stranger. Because I need to hear your questions, any question, the question.

One thing, though.

Just don't ask if I'm insane.



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# Ivy Fehervari



## SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLISHING

THIS TIME, *Cemetery Dance* casts its spotlight on Prime Books. Born from the ashes of a defunct Canadian comic book company, then re-launched in 2001 by Sean Wallace, Prime Books has been transformed into a multi-genre forerunner.

While in the process of packing for his move from OH to PA, Wallace made the time to chat about Prime Books, his additional imprints and how he really feels about the horror industry.

**CD** Thanks for talking to us today. Lets jump right in... Is Prime Books no longer your main horror imprint?

**PB** Correct. Prime has already moved away from horror. It's now the edgy and quirky science fiction, fantasy, and horror imprint, where boundaries are a bit looser than the individual genres themselves. You could almost say that it's a muddy mirror reflection of what the Ministry of Whimsy represents now.

**CD** Why the additional imprints? How many imprints does Prime Books have and where will the bulk of your horror titles now be placed?

**PB** Prime Books, Inc., includes Prime Books, House of Dominion, Library Empyrean, and I've since added a few, including aegis enterprises. The reason for all these imprints is it's generally harder to get markets to review

titles if you're overwhelming them with book after book, especially with my large output. It proved smarter and easier to simply establish a few imprints and adapt the marketing plans for each. And the other reason is because I like a lot of genres and the imprints reflect a strong desire on my part to publish and experiment in those areas. There's very little that I don't like. I am just as comfortable publishing mystery, or erotica, or romance, or westerns, or any other genre. Put simply, I'm a publisher, who happens to publish science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

**CD** What influenced your initial decision to publish with print-on-demand technology versus offset printing?

**PB** Money. I was in college and I didn't have the finances to risk printing an offset title and print-on-demand technology seemed like a low risk solution to my problems.

**CD** And now, how has the move to offset been? Is financial backing an issue?

**PB** The gradual move to offset printing is meant to be a solution to the distribution issue of getting into bookstores. I have a number of offset titles planned for next year that should fully complement the POD business. But I suspect that the gradual move to offset will require a different mindset. It's a question of finances, not so much

distribution or marketing, when it comes to offset. There's a lot of capital investment in an offset title and that's what I have to be prepared for. Thankfully, I have a number of people that I can ask advice from. I think we've gotten to the point where I can risk doing one or two offset titles a year without threatening to upset the apple cart.

**CD** Does POD technology allow more room for risks? Also, what are some advantages to POD technology?

**PB** POD certainly does allow some allowances in terms of risks because it limits the (potential) damage to just the setup and marketing expenses, so publishing companies have quite a bit of leeway in experimentation. The only advantage to such a technology is that the cost of warehousing is almost flattened, as I don't have to warehouse hardly anything. I'll generally print comp copies for the author and review copies and I don't print anymore than that, at least for myself. The rest I drop-ship directly to the bookstores that have advance orders waiting for the title. This way I carry minimal stock on my shelves.

**CD** How has POD technology advanced over the years and how have those advancements helped Prime Books? Also, what was your experience at finding a POD printer that could provide you with a quality product?

**PB** The printing technology has advanced to the point where it's very difficult for the average consumer to be able to tell the difference between offset or POD. The printing, binding, and colors have all gotten better over the last years as the printer upgrades and replaces its equipment.

I didn't have to look far for a printer, back in those days. It was pretty much only LightningSource (then Lightning-Print) and I don't quite recall where I came across a reference but I researched them thoroughly and never really looked back. There have been of course, a number of other digital short-run printing services established since then, but none with all the advantages that LightningSource currently has to offer.

**CD** How big of a per-copy cost is there between printing ten copies and five hundred?

**PB** It's print-on-demand. It doesn't really scale like traditional offset. The unit cost at ten copies is the same as five hundred. If something generally has that much sales potential it's probably smarter and cheaper to find another short-run printing service, and print a 500-copy run and reap the benefits of such a decision.

However, POD does have a number of serious drawbacks and there are a few plans in the pot to release one or two offset titles later this year. One of them is *The Sea of Flesh and Ash*, by Jeffrey and Scott Thomas. Again, the gradual move to offset printing is meant to be a solution to the distribution issue of getting into bookstores, but not as a complete replacement for my POD program.

**CD** Who purchases the bulk of Prime Books? Has POD made it more difficult to get into mainstream bookstores?

**PB** For the most part, my books are generally purchased by customers at online bookstores or by library systems or independent bookstores. The wholesaler's sales reports don't really break it down. It's generally difficult to tell to which markets these books are going to, but those three are generally assumed to be the majority consumers.

For mainstream markets, it depends on the bookstore. It is slightly harder to order print-on-demand titles compared to their offset counterparts, but I doubt it would be a future stumbling block.

My contention would be that getting into mainstream bookstores is more an effect of marketing and pushing demand more than anything else.

**CD** What was your reaction back when Barnes and Noble removed the horror section in their bookstores?

**PB** There are a number of advantages and disadvantages for bookstores to eliminate the horror section. It de-ghettoizes horror and places it firmly in general fiction. In a sense this might actually be a step in the right direction. However, there's a flipside to this, though, because it might make it that much harder for readers to find horror. I would personally prefer to see the horror department re-instituted, because I generally don't browse general fiction. I'm a genre-slut, through and through.

**CD** Earlier in the interview you mentioned the shift to de-emphasize horror. Will Prime Books eventually stop publishing horror altogether?

**PB** Oh no. I'm not abandoning horror completely. I simply don't want to be labeled as a horror publisher. My personal experience with publishing horror and dealing with the horror community has been disappointing, on a number of levels. The horror small press seems to exist to pander to the same customer base, with every title, and I don't want that, by any means. You see it at the HWA, in the small press, in the readers. Sometimes it's one big happy circle jerk. The small press is generally centered on itself and that's not a recipe for long-term growth.

**CD** What do you think needs to happen?

**PB** I think horror as a genre does serve a purpose, but it needs to lift itself by its bootstraps and maintain a high level of professionalism, if it wants to succeed. I really don't see that happening.

**CD** Why not?

**PB** Nothing has really changed, in the last few years. There have been *some* changes, but I don't think it's really a "boom" in horror. I've started

to market some horror titles outside of the community, because the sales just aren't there. Take for example, Gemma File's first short story collection, *Kissing Carrion*, which I released earlier this year. I oversaw that project carefully in terms of layout and marketing, and it paid off in a number of ways. Especially in the way that it was received. I even managed to get it reviewed very favorably in the national *Romantic Times*, which came as a very nice surprise.

**CD** How important is expanding your audience? Is it a primary goal and if so what are you doing to realize that goal?

**PB** Increasing sales certainly is a very important goal for Prime Books. There are a lot of benefits associated with such an expansion, like being able to switch over to offset, increasing my margins, lowering my prices and more. The best way to accomplish this is continue to work on marketing and publishing the best authors that I can.

**CD** How has the Internet helped to market Prime Books (and the imprints)?

**PB** In terms of online sales, the Internet has been a mixed bag. Most of my sales are through bookstores like Clarkesworld, Shocklines, etc., and I don't generally like to worry about direct sales too much. But in terms of marketing, the Internet has certainly been a boon, for creating reviews, word-of-mouth, and more, which can have a snowball effect and create buzz or fission for a number of titles.

**CD** What types of promotions and advertising has been most effective?

**PB** Two words: Review copies. I'd have to say that this works more than anything else. Review copies do your walking and talking and selling. Nothing else quite yet has had that effect and I don't put much faith into anything else. I'd rather devote the monies into review copies and get them into the hands of those people who can make it happen, in terms of sales.

For me, print advertising represents a very poor return on investment, in terms of dollars to sales. I don't really do too much of it now and I don't expect to do too much of it in the future. I'd



rather use that money and dump it on review copies..

**CD** Name some of the Prime Books you are most proud of?

**PB** Some of the books that I am most proud of include *I-o* by Simon Logan, *Leviathan 3* edited by Forrest Aguirre and Jeff VanderMeer, *Veniss Underground* by Jeff VanderMeer, *City of Saints and Madmen* by Jeff VanderMeer, *The Burden of Indigo* by Gene O'Neill, *The Etched City* by KJ Bishop and far more recently, *Little Gods* by Tim Pratt and *The Tyrant* by Michael Cisco.

**CD** What are the most copies of a title that you have sold?

**PB** Some titles have sold easily more than two thousand copies and some are moving to three thousand or even four thousand.

**CD** Recently you've received a lot of early buzz about author Catherynne M. Valente. Did Prime Books open the poetry imprint because of Valente?

**PB** Yes. I was very much impressed by her poetry and I knew of one or two other poets of interest that I had long wanted to do and this was the perfect opportunity. So I dusted off my plans for aegis enterprises and assigned it to the poetry imprint. The first title is by Catherynne M. Valente and the second is by one of my favorite authors, CS Thompson, with the title of *Ghost Shadows*. We hope that Valente's poetry collection does as well as her first novel—which snagged the top position at Shocklines' top ten best-selling advance titles for a week and still continues to go strong. I have every confidence that we'll see this repeated and reflected in her sales.

**CD** Shifting gears a bit, what are your responsibilities at Cosmos Books (an imprint of Wildside Press)? And how do you juggle your responsibilities for both publishing companies?

**PB** The way I juggle my responsibilities between Prime Books and Wildside Press can be summed up in two words: very carefully!

I'm currently Senior Editor at Cosmos Books, specializing in publishing science fiction, fantasy, and horror.



I'm also responsible for submitting projects to Wildside Press, in terms of design, typesetting, etc, and for oversight of such things as marketing, author's comp copies, and many more.

**CD** What makes a title more suitable for Prime Books instead of Cosmos Books?

**PB** Prime titles tend to be edgier and darker than most of my Cosmos titles and in terms of genre it's harder to define such titles sometimes. Some could be easily considered slipstream, new weird, new wave, interstitial, or whatever the current popular term is these days, but I try to slot titles into the right publishing company. I currently issue more Prime titles per



year than I do at Wildside Press, but this should change this year, as I work more and more at Wildside Press. I hope to gain a lot more experience in terms of publishing, from working closely with John Betancourt. If I'm lucky maybe I'll be allowed to do a few things that I haven't had the chance to do quite yet. I'd like a lot more experience in traditional printing, magazine publishing, marketing and distribution.

**CD** What criteria do you use to select a title specifically for Prime Books?

**PB** I generally keep my ears to the ground and listen or I listen very carefully to my friends, which is why I don't have submission guidelines on the website. I really don't have the time or the patience to deal with the slush. There isn't enough time in the day. So I usually go after someone of interest to myself or my friends recommend names or titles and I go with the flow.

**CD** Does that process work for making a profit?

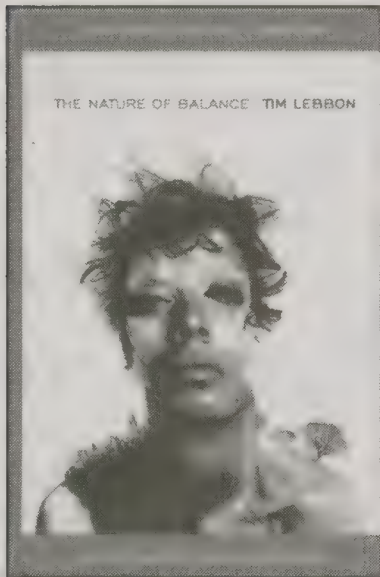
**PB** Unfortunately, I can't publish everyone that I'd like. And slow-moving titles don't pay the bills. So it does come down to making the right decisions and marketing the authors that can go the distance. I should hope to God that Prime titles make money to pay the bills, but it really depends on the project itself. There are some books that I do "just for the love." I don't really expect to make much money on those projects, but I have to get it out of my system.

**CD** What percentage of your writers are new comers versus established authors?

**PB** I would say new authors represent a small percentage. Perhaps as high as fifteen percent of my total output.

**CD** Did you make any publishing mistakes early on that you would share with us?

**PB** Yes. *City of Saints and Madmen*, Jeff VanderMeer. It incorporated a lot of design choices that had never been done with POD technology. For one thing we moved the barcode to one of the flaps, which was in of itself, unusual, and for the cover we incorpo-

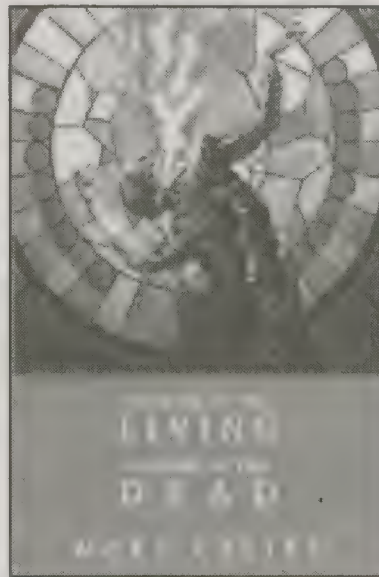


rated an encoded story and hid the title and author's name within it. We also incorporated a number of illustrations, all of which took time. The printing technology wasn't quite appropriate for some of the illustrations, so we had to replace them a number of times with line-art versions. It probably took us six months to get that book right. A long six months. We promised ourselves that we would never do anything like that ever again. But it did put Prime Books on the map. It was on *Publishers Weekly* Top Ten SF books for 2002 and Amazon's Top Ten SF Books for 2002. The overall experience of that book provided me with a direction. So I'm quite pleased with how it all came out, even if it was a pain in the ass!

But I also made quite a number of other mistakes early on by over committing and by making some stupid business decisions. Silly mistakes such as investing in paying anthologies. Anthologies don't work well with print-on-demand printing and distribution business models for any number of reasons, but I loaded up on a few early on, and learned my mistake soon after. I then turned on a dime and eliminated most of my anthologies and worked solely on novels and short story collections.

**CD** What were some of the reasons that anthologies did not work for Prime Books?

**PB** Between the high unit costs, the acquisition expense (for each contributor, whether it be in the form of royalty or a flat-rate payment), and low sales associated with such books,



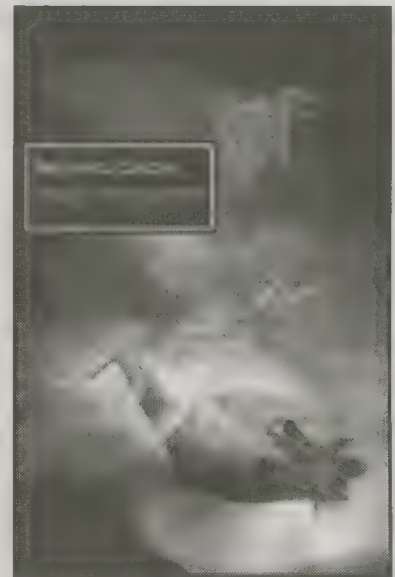
the margins are often razor-thin and not worth investing the capital or the time into. I've seen cases where after royalties were paid out that the anthology was actually losing the publisher a tidy sum of money and that's just plain wrong. As much as the temptation is to release these types of books, I do have to draw the line somewhere and I think I learned that about a year or a year and a half into Prime Books.

**CD** Are you still publishing the *Strange Pleasures* and *Darkness Rising* series? Have those done better than your other anthologies and if so, why?

**PB** Yes. I'm still publishing *Strange Pleasures* and *Darkness Rising*, for different reasons. *Strange Pleasures* originally started off as being edited by yours truly and then I gave it away to John Grant and Dave Hutchinson to edit. For all that it's always been a personal project and so long as it breaks even, then I'll be pleased to keep publishing it annually. The same pretty much goes for *Darkness Rising*, which over time has evolved now into an annual anthology. I'll keep pushing it as far as I can.

**CD** What was the biggest obstacle you had to overcome?

**PB** The biggest obstacle I've had to face is largely over commitment issues. Sometimes it's hard to say no, but it's gotten easier and easier to make those business decisions. I'd like to think that I'm moving in the right direction. Prime Books has been received very



nicely in review channels, and sales are moving upwards. I think that I've seen the light, in that I can't do every book that I want to do and that every book should contribute to paying my bills and not drain my bank account. Publishing is a business. It's simply taken some time for that lesson to sink in, I would say.

**CD** Who else is involved with Prime Books (and the imprints) and how are the tasks divided?

**PB** Garry Nurrish, Luis Rodrigues, and JT Lindroos handle most of the cover designs for Prime Books and I handle most of the typesetting. The website design and maintenance is taken care of by Simon Logan. I assign tasks to my designers, dependent on their style and timing. I couldn't do a lot without these guys and they make Prime what it is right now.

**CD** Who are your mentors and/or influences?

**PB** The main culprit would be Jeff VanderMeer. He really hammered into my thick skull that marketing was perhaps the most important factor in publishing and that without it you're treading water or worse, drowning. So I started investing in review copies and building up a review database and rubbing shoulders with the people that I needed to know and all of that came from Jeff.

The other person I have to blame for my current predicament is Nick Mamatas. I first met Mamatas in one of my Prime Books anthologies, *Strange*

*Pleasures 2*. Then I later crossed paths with him at the HWA message boards, where I was very impressed with his brutally honest arguments. He's since given me much to think on in terms of advice, suggestions and complaints. I can always trust him to seriously beat some sense into me whether or not I want to hear it. I don't really have a choice in the matter.

VanderMeer and Mamatas are my bookends, in a sense.

**CD** Where do you want Prime Books to be in five years? What would you like to be recognized as?

**PB** I'd like to be doing a lot more offset titles and I'd like to eventually try and do a few pocketbooks, just for curiosity's sake. I want to market everything as if it were mainstream whenever possible. And I want to be known as a good publisher. Beyond that, increasing gross sales, decreasing unit costs, increasing profit margins, increasing marketing, etc., are all current goals that Prime Books should be aiming for.

**CD** And lastly, what advice would you give to someone starting a small press publishing company?

**PB** Run. Run away. Don't stop. Don't look behind. Invest in stocks and bonds. Invest in anything but this. Get married. Have some children. Have a lot of children. Work the nine-to-five job. You don't need the hassle. You've got to be bonkers to be in this business. Having said all that, it's a drug, a habit, and a need. You just can't let go. And that's what I love about publishing. I wouldn't be doing anything else in the world but this.

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*Tim Lebbon*, The Nature of Balance  
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*Dregs of Society*, Mike Laimo

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*City of Saints and Madmen*, VanderMeer  
*Crimson*, Gord Rollo  
*Decadence 1*, ed. Monica O'Rourke  
*Suffer the Flesh*, Monica O'Rourke  
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*Dreaming of Angels*, ed. Gord Rollo and Monica O'Rourke  
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*The Rose of Heaven*, Michael Hemmingson  
*The Rat and the Serpent*, Bryn Barbery  
*Black Blossom*, Boban Knezevic

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*The Translation of Father Torturo*, Brendan Connell  
*Mephisto and Goldilocks*, Srdjan Krstic

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*Burn*, Jonathan Lyons (reprint)  
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#### August 2004

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*The Monster Throne*, Vanda Ivanovic

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*Tides from the New World*, Tobias Buckell

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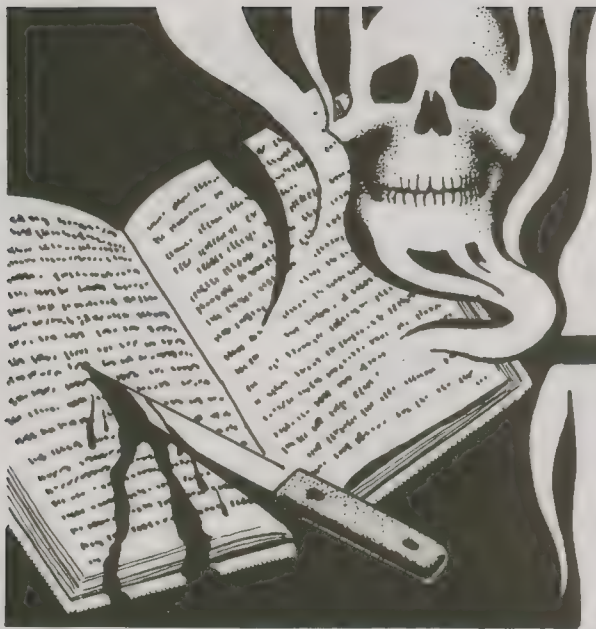
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# CD REVIEWS

## BOOKS, VIDEOS, SOFTWARE...

**All the Lonely People**, by David B. Silva; Delirium Books, 2003; 200 pgs.; \$45.00

Any horror fiction fan can tell you David B. Silva is a heavy hitter in the genre. His short stories appear in the most notable anthologies and win awards. His novels, too, gain deserved attention and live beyond their designated shelf lives. He is also a gifted editor. I will never forget an anthology he edited with Paul F. Wilson more than ten years ago called *Dead End: City Limits*. And no discussion of horror magazines ever occurs without the mention of Silva's legendary creation, *The Horror Show*. He is a fixture in the industry. You can always rely on him to deliver the goods.

Silva's newest novel, *All the Lonely People*, begins in a bar. A stranger shows up with an odd wooden box. He explains that the cryptic marking on the box is actually a Yaqui Indian hieroglyph, and that the box itself is a trap for a man's spirit. Naturally, the box is opened and, well, all hell breaks loose.

The structure of the novel is choppy. The chapters, which Silva labels "Parts," are pretty short and are themselves subdivided. Still, the narrative flows smoothly. The short scenes become a racing collage but somehow you can discern each and every moment with clarity and depth. The author puts you at ease with comfortable, familiar dialogue and, just when you relax a little, he shakes the hell out of you. His skill and confidence are evident throughout the work. He's got you right where he wants you, and he lets you have it. It is a great ride.

*All the Lonely People* is a clever and fast-moving novel with a satisfying resolution. It is not overly graphic, but has plenty of jolts and shocks to focus your attention.

And while some of the plot elements are familiar, they are presented with a surprising freshness. After all these years, David B. Silva demonstrates he can create stories as well as he ever did. Highly recommended.

-Wayne Edwards

**As Timeless As Infinity: The Complete Twilight Zone Scripts Of Rod Serling, Volume One**; Ed., Tony Albarella; Gauntlet, 2004; 488 pgs.; \$66.00

Exploring the shadowy by-ways between logic and dream, Serling's *Twilight Zone* offered to a viewing audience weaned on overly simplistic tales of good vs. evil unique parables facing disturbing ambiguities of perception, honor, truth, and identity—culturally sensitive issues that neither straight drama nor the restrictive policies of censorship could adequately explore. The literary quality, imaginative power, and sterling characterization which bled from Serling's psychologically profound, introspective teleplays can be enjoyed as never before in volume one of *As Timeless As Infinity: The Complete Twilight Zone Scripts Of Rod Serling*.

A book that lives up to its hype, this is indeed the definitive treatment of Serling's lauded series, including complete scripts from Serling's personal archives collection at Ithica College, and presented in their original format. Featuring ten complete scripts—*The Time Element*, *Where Is Everybody?*, *Third From The Sun*, *The Purple Testament*, *The Big, Tall Wish*, *Eye Of The Beholder*, *A Most Unusual Camera* (and its rare alternative version), *The Mind And The Matter*, and *The Dummy*—this collection also includes handwritten notes from the author, and in some cases rewrites of stories so as to allow comparison between

the initial idea of a dramatic presentation and its final result. As much a tribute to Serling's creative process as an examination of the teleplays, this impressive compilation of drama and critical analysis frames Serling's scripts with editor Albarella's thoughtful commentaries, interviews, and tributes from the cast and crew of the series. Engaging tributes from macabre masters Richard Matheson and Rockne S. O. Bannon, and introductory matter from Carol Serling round out the collection.

Editor Tony Albarella (one of the Board of Directors for the Rod Serling Memorial Foundation) is responsible for this definitive look at Serling's landmark teleplays, and should be congratulated for creating a rich informative context with which to admire these works, compiling the wealth of stills, photos, and rare *Twilight Zone* memorabilia which decorate this substantial reading experience. Among the extras are wonderful shots of Serling and crew in each of the mentioned episodes, make-up effects, telegrams, and personal correspondence in the "Tributes and Rarities" section, each of which adds depth to the experience as a whole.

Of paramount importance are the scripts themselves, illustrating in morally complex storylines the verve with which Serling challenged socially immediate issues of gender, politics, and mob mentality. Merging intimately involving crises of the self with political and social conflicts, Serling found in the *Twilight Zone* a symbolic borderland between knowledge and dream, emotion and idea—a forum encouraging stories crafted as both surface entertainment (itself an admirable achievement) and as thought-provoking, emotionally poignant allegories. From the social conformity terrors of *Eye Of The*

*Beholder* to the psychological ambiguity of *The Dummy*, these scripts infuse the science fiction and fantasy genres with uncharacteristic if much needed humanistic concern. Social and psychological, mystical and terrifying, Serling's fables explore the agonies and senselessness of war, mechanistic society, and human frailty. A fluid arena of terror and joy, the internal transformations of characters often mirror universal conflicts, merging the supernatural and the scientific with conscience—a true depth of feeling—impressive to behold in scripts suggesting both the depth/scope of imaginative literature and the complexity of humankind's fears and wish fulfillment.

While many projects of this nature would run the danger of veering into indiscriminating hero worship, Albarella approaches Serling's storytelling with passion and objectivity. The result is a book emphasizing Serling's successes as well as his shortcomings, an accurate and balanced evaluation. Alabor of love offering Serling's stories as well as the stories behind them, this first volume is at once both a collection of television's most powerful expressions and a tribute to genius in words and images.

—William P. Simmons

***Bibliomancy*, by Elizabeth Hand; PS Publishing, 2003; 296 pgs.; \$50**

The sound of melancholy, the sound of deep despair, the songs of years past heard from the vantage of the here-and-now—that's the sound of Elizabeth Hand in her new collection of novellas *Bibliomancy*. It's clear that this isn't just genre fiction and it isn't just fiction. The writing on display here is nothing less than distilled emotions, ready for the reader to decant by the act of reading.

Though most of the works have at least some sense of the supernatural, this is clearly not the point of any of the writing. Hand is not trying to scare her readers or even unsettle them. Instead, she's trying to re-define the world, to give it numinous edges, to blur the boundaries between what we want and what we are. 'Cleopatra Brimstone' with its focus on insects and rape is the closest to a horror story, but Hand's careful prose keeps the more horrific aspects at bay. Instead, we're taken inside the head of predators both male and female. By putting the reader on both sides of the food chain, Hand creates an interesting dissonance. The tale suffers a bit as it comes to a rather tidy ending.

'Pavane for a Prince of the Air' is a straightforward piece of Twilight-Zone style melancholy, elevated by Hand's careful prose and close understanding of the pagan rituals she describes. In it, the

supernatural is distilled into the spiritual. It's heartfelt and insightful, though the action-oriented crowd will find it lacking in action. It's their loss. Wistful doesn't get much better than this.

For my money, 'Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol', is the best of the bunch, and well worth the price of admission. It's about a lost kids' show, a slightly subversive bit of suburbiana that Tony Maroni—affectionately and enjoyably based on Joey Ramone—obsesses about while staying with a tautly-wound, newly-divorced chum from school. It's the kind of story that's just bursting with life, skillfully rendered and enjoyably resolved. Should Hand choose to write a novel about this character, I'll be there to read it in a New York minute.

The collection winds up with the more typically melancholy novella 'The Least Trumps'. Hand creates faux writers and their books with such authority that readers are likely to enter them in a search engine. Children's authors, artists and no-account drifters all come engagingly to life. Here, Hand lets her characters escape from the traps they've carefully constructed. It's a detailed, vibrant piece of purely American magic realism.

The unifying force here is Hand's voice and prose. She manages to invest every word with the correct weight. She displays a light touch when it helps the story and a darker, more complex grasp when things get tough. There's the feeling that behind the prose, behind an invisible wall, is a world of real emotion. Through the skill of her writing, you get to experience those emotions in all their depths and subtle shades without having to experience the events on a firsthand basis. *Bibliomancy* manages to live up to its suggestive title.



You might not like what Hand conjures up, but there's no denying that her spells are successful. This is indeed a collection of literary magic.

—Rick Kleffel

**BUBBA HO-TEP; Music by Brian Tyler; Silver Sphere SS 002; 30 tracks, 50 mins.**

Don Coscarelli's highly inventive comedic horror film, adapting a Joe R. Lansdale short story in which Elvis saves the earth from the onslaught of the soul-sucking mummy named Bubba Ho-Tep, composer Brian Tyler serves up an equally inventive and thoroughly enchanting modern-flavored score. Tyler, whose efforts last year on such notable films as *TIMELINE*, *DARKNESS FALLS*, and *CHILDREN OF DUNE* have really elevated him to Hollywood Composer Of Note status, plays it straight throughout the wry film; he embraces the film's almost surreal sense of humor with musical elements that are reflective of Elvis' country-tinged pop without completely losing the score's necessary dramatic edge. No, the score doesn't suddenly croon with Elvislike karaoke; in fact there are no vocals in the score at all. Nor does Tyler outright mimic any of The King's famous songs—but the essence is there, Elvis' country essence, anyway—through a swaggering, recurring instrumental riff for electric guitar that sounds both down-home peaceful and rippling with restrained energy. Tyler captures the heroic spirit of Lansdale's mummy slayer with an East Texas drawl that rings as clearly in the music as it does in Bruce Campbell's terrific performance.

As Tyler describes in the CD booklet (which also contains comments from Coscarelli), "I wanted to compose a score that integrated the Elvis music of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s against a celebration of horror film music and Egyptian overtones. But the key in this balance was to have a strong aspect of emotion while leaving room for comedy."

There are the customary suspense cues—echoey synth tonalities and thrumming, chordal ambiances (the "Prologue" is especially evocative, with its tendrils of musical *mysterioso* emerging, sinewy like, from some dark, chordal depths, like the escape of a malevolent spirit from a shunned, tomb)—but the heart of the music remains in a docile, country-rock based tune that represents both Bubba and Elvis, their motifs behaving as alter egos of the same musical whole. Instrumentally, they are the same, although Bubba's motif (as exemplified in the second track, "Bubba,") is a little more ambient while Elvis' motif ("The King") gives it into a forward-moving rhythm. Those two cues, in fact, merge into one another, Bubba's

motif becoming the intro for the firmly stated Elvis motif; their intrinsic sameness obvious here and throughout the score. The tune is very compelling, richly performed on clear-toned and fluid electric or acoustic guitars, and really invests the film with a strong emotive flavor and a terrific gentle cadence.

The score's action material derives around a hard-driven, heavy-metal guitar riff not unlike that used in the *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* TV theme. "Let's Go, Man" is relentlessly energetic, a powerfully determined cue dominated by that heavy-metal riff that really starts the action rolling. In "A.C.T.I.O.N." the score completely sheds its crispy mummy wrappings and just lets loose with a furiously onslaught of keyboard and choir over drum set. "Body Bag of Fun" is a straightforward country instrumental for electric guitar and rock combo. "Trailer Park" is an outright rocker, as is "PBBS" (think: The Ventures Meet The Shadows Meet Elvis), while "Body Bag of Fun" is a kind of Elvis scherzo, a nonthematic and straightforward country instrumental for electric guitar and rock combo. "One Bad Ho-Tep" is an energetic action cue with those heavy metal chords providing a down beat that is soon embellished by chanting, processed voices (Tyler's own voice, by the way, multi-layered on top of itself to become an "Elvis choir") and trills of Egyptian woodwind, slams of brass, with the clear toned guitar riff running a straight course through the rest of the cue's mayhem.

Tyler's Bubba/Elvis Theme is given a number of variations, providing a genuine sense of poignancy in cues like "Death Of A President" and "Regret," where it is arranged into a wistful and melancholy tonality for electric guitar reverb over low synths, and the concluding "All Is Well" where it is given a pleasing resolution for piano. "The King's Highway" plays the theme in a fully fleshed out rock combo rendition which is downright danceable; the same arrangement is reprised and extended in "End Title Themes," where it ultimately segues into a restrained heavy metal embodiment with the inclusion of the BUFFYlike chords, and climaxing with a powerful denouement accentuated by Elvis choir.

Tyler, incidentally, performed the score by himself, enhancing the electronic ambiances with layers of natural instruments including, guitars, drums, electric bass, bouzouki, timpani, and so on, all of which integrates very well in creating an eclectic and very satisfying musical texture that supports the score's characteristics very well. It isn't often a horror score can boast an Elvislike instrumental riff, but Tyler carries it off splendidly.

It never emerges as awkward or even tongue-in-cheek silly, although the music definitely grins. It captures the essence of Coscarelli's quirky film and Campbell's brilliant characterization, and it shines on CD as a wonderful evocation of horror and humor that resonates very well on its own. It is definitely one of the best scores of the season.

—Randall D. Larson

**CABIN FEVER; Music by Nathan Barr & Angelo Badalamenti; La-La Land LLLCD 1008**

Eli Roth's uneven homage to the camp and gory fun of 1970s sexified-teens-in-the-woods horror films has been given a thoroughly evocative and compelling musical score, combining the efforts of Angelo Badalamenti (TWIN PEAKS, BLUE VELVET, CITY OF LOST CHILDREN), WHO wrote three primary themes due to an ongoing acquaintanceship with Roth, and Nathan Barr (FROM DUSK 'TILL DAWN 3), who composed the bulk of the underscore.

The CD includes a few of snippets of dialog, tracked independently from the music and five heavy rock numbers, surrounding a dozen tracks from the film's musical score. Three bonus tracks are included with additional or alternative Badalamenti motifs.

The score opens with a tremendously powerful Main Title, launched with reverberating whispers of violin, a continual, low rumbling chord, and high squeaks of synthesizer, all of which grows steadily stronger and closer, like the eerie wail of a distant steam locomotive that blares forward and onward until it is completely overpowering—or of a vicious whale whose soft, gentle sound has been transformed into something malicious and relentlessly deadly. This ambience sustains the bulk of the moody score, which merges and morphs synthesizers and acoustics to create a nightmarish sound design.

Barr created the score, appropriately enough, by himself in a family cabin on a remote island on Lake Michigan, developing his basic musical line and then layering on top of it an assemblage of enhancing instruments and timbres that result in an organic and quite mesmerizing sound mixture. Barr proves himself very capable in achieving suspense moments through his well-integrated musical textures, and the score is genuinely haunting, its tonalities wisping through the air, dappled by elusive rays of synthesized sunshine—or drifting across the murky, thrumming surface of a steaming and polluted backwoods lake—to create a persuasively apprehensive atmosphere that intensifies as it continues and develops.

While Barr is generating the film's underlying spookiness, Badalamenti's musical contributions lend themselves to character, including a pretty love theme for Paul and Karen (introduced on acoustic guitar and later beautifully reprised for echoey synths in one of the film's big shock moments, "Red Love"), a persuasively rhythmic *mysterioso* ("Hermit's Lair"), and a cool vibes-and-percussion jazz motif for "Deputy Wilson." This collaboration works quite well, providing a respite from Barr's shadowy musical eloquence and enlivening the characters for a moment, until Barr comes back in like the flesh-eating virus, dissolving the gentle spirit of Badalamenti's character cues with a mildewlike oppression of dissonant chords and frightening tones.

Badalamenti's material operates fairly independently from Barr's music, and it's definitely the latter that gives the film its dark soul. "Leg Shaving" is probably the film's creepiest moment, and Barr scores it beautifully, his multiple layers of instrumentation gently spooling off just like Marcy's crimson, withered skin. It's a cue that exemplifies the character of the entire score, embodying both the sordid delight and the campy ghoulishness of Roth's filmic style.

The CD includes fairly substantial notes about the film and its music from director Roth, and comments from composer Barr. Thanks to La-La Land for identifying which cues on the CD were written by which composer. For ordering info, see: [www.lalalandrecords.com](http://www.lalalandrecords.com)

—Randall D. Larson

**Changing of Faces, by Tim Lebbon; PS Publishing, 2004; 98 pgs.; \$14 (signed trade pb) \$40.00 (signed hc)**

Some stories allow a sequel. Others demand one. Tim Lebbon's first novella for PS Publishing, *Naming of Parts* belongs to the latter category. Now that *Naming of Parts* is widely available, as part of the Leisure paperback release *Fears Unnamed*, it's only natural that the sequel be released by PS Publishing. This sequel does more than just follow up on what happened to 12-year old Jack and his father. It successfully ups the ante in action and outright terror, while preserving the fragile emotional core that made *Naming of Parts* more than an intelligent apocalyptic zombie story.

*Naming of Parts* took the infamous premise of George Romero's NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD movies and wrapped a poignant coming-of-age tale around it. At its conclusion, Jack, the now-older-than-his-twelve-years protagonist and his father had found a seaside shelter and potential respite from the horrors of a world where anything that dies—from grass to grand-

parents—can come back to life. As *Naming of Parts* begins, the survivors on the ferry find themselves once again under siege. But this time the attackers are not the resurrected dead, but animals of field and stream grown impossibly large. The attack is sudden, fearsome, and effectively choreographed. Lebbon directs his characters with the aplomb of a filmmaker in command of vast resources and vast talent. Every movement is charged with tension, every sound has the potential for violence. Characters you care about die sudden, horrific deaths at a rapid pace.

But unlike movie sequels, *Changing of Faces* knows what made the original work so powerful. Lebbon remembers to charge the action with emotions. He infuses the violence with the tenderness of a young boy growing up too fast under terrible circumstances. He tempers the monstrous terror with the fears of a father desperately trying to shield his son from both death and the unwanted responsibilities of being an adult. And *Changing of Faces* ups the ante emotionally from the first work, where Jack and his family provided the sole emotional focus. In *Changing of Faces*, you'll learn to feel sorry for the monsters.

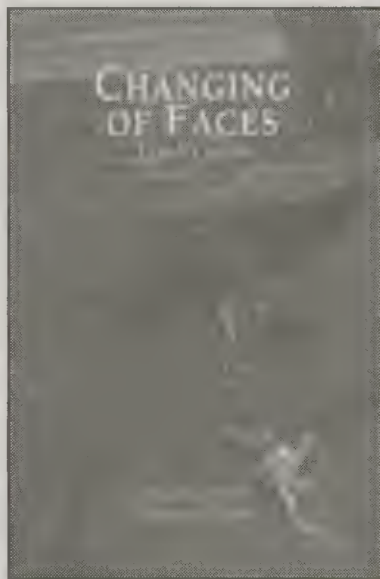
Lebbon makes perfect use of the novella format, hiding his twists and revealing them with the assured pacing of an author fully in command of his medium. There's a lot to think about in *Changing of Faces*. And while Lebbon gives the reader a satisfying ending, this is an ending that satisfies in part because another sequel is clearly possible. Jack still has some growing up to do, and no matter how terrifying that prospect might be, it's an experience that readers will definitely want to continue to share.

—Rick Kleffel

***Chocolate Park*, by Chesya Burke; Undaunted Press, 2004; 40 pgs.; \$6.50**

In horror's heyday in the 1980s, the fashionable question to ask was, "Where are all the women horror writers?" Talents like Poppy Z. Brite, Caitlin Kiernan, Charlee Jacob, Elizabeth Massie and many others soon appeared, often outdoing their male counterparts, so this question is no longer asked. The new question should be, "Where are all the minority writers?" Just as cultural diversity is the strength of the American people, so the horror genre would be well served by examining the special fears of different peoples. Quick: how many black horror authors can you name? Well, there's Tananarive Due and that new guy Brandon Massey. Newton Streeter and Marcus Broadhurst are in the wings...

And now there's Chesya Burke.



The four interconnected tales that comprise *Chocolate Park* announce the arrival of a truly new voice in horror fiction that's going to shake things up. She writes of the real life, everyday horrors experienced by the economically downtrodden. So much horror fiction comes from a solidly middle class perspective, in which supernatural elements are introduced into a suburban utopia to bring terror to its residents. In Burke's all-too-real portrait of the projects, horror exists out in the open on every street corner in the glazed eyes of junkies and false smiles of prostitutes. It is a place where hope for a better future is institutionally crushed and the only escape is in a drugged-out haze or mind-numbing aggression. Here the supernatural represents not horror, but possibility.

The title piece, "Chocolate Park," tells the heartbreaking tale of a young black woman, Ebony, trying to care for her two sisters after the death of their mother. The younger sister Sable is bright and has the capacity to lift herself up if given the chance, but the other one, Coco, has fallen into the trap of drug addiction, a habit for which only prostitution can pay. When Coco rips off a dealer, who then threatens Sable, Ebony must make a painful decision no sister should be asked to make. "The Black Lady" concerns an elderly woman whose voodoo powers represent the only hope for justice among a people ignored by officialdom. Just to prove that poverty is not exclusively a racial issue, "Love, Drama and All" concerns a young white couple who married because of an unplanned pregnancy who see their lives ended before they had a chance to live. The Black Lady returns to help victims of a vicious drug dealer exact revenge in "All that I Owe, I Pay Now".

Each tale plants the seed of the tale to follow, and all is interconnected in the microcosm of the projects surrounding Chocolate Park. Like the language of the streets she writes of, Burke's style is spare and hard-hitting. Her prose is deceptively simple on the surface, but rich in depth. There's as much going on between the lines as there is in them. The stories she has to tell are painful, but important. She reminds us that horror doesn't hide away in ancient mansions, but is right out in the streets in front of us. Still, her work doesn't just wallow in despair as so much of today's dark fiction does. She finds a ray of hope in the face of hopelessness, reaffirming that the strength of the human spirit can rise above any challenge if not ground down by oppression first.

—Garrett Peck

***The Codex*, by Douglas Preston; Tor Forge, 2004; 396 pgs.; \$24.95**

Douglas Preston is best known as the co-author (with Lincoln Child) of such scientific horror/adventures as *Relic* and *Still Life with Crows*. (He is also the brother of Richard Preston, best-selling author of the widely acclaimed nonfiction horror book *The Hot Zone*.) Preston and Child have taken a break from collaborating to do a solo novel each. Child's is *Utopia*, a techno-thriller involving terrorists and amusement parks. Preston's, which we're here to talk about, is a good old-fashioned jungle adventure story in the *Indiana Jones* mold.

Self-made millionaire Maxwell Broadbent—a notorious treasure hunter and tomb robber—has been diagnosed with inoperable cancer. He calls his three sons home, and upon their arrival they discover their father's many artistic and anthropological treasures have disappeared. He's left them a videotape from the grave with a daunting challenge. Like the kings and pharaohs whose tombs he plundered, he's interred himself somewhere in the world with his treasures. If his sons want their inheritance, they're going to have to find him. Among those treasures is an ancient Mayan codex that details all the medical knowledge of this once advanced, now extinct culture. It might hold a cure for cancer or other diseases. Such knowledge could mean huge medical advances, and a lot of money for pharmaceutical companies. Soon all three sons are heading separately to Honduras to find their father's burial place, with their father's murderous former partner, Marcus Hauser, hot on their tail. If the dangers of the rainforest don't kill them off, Hauser will.

For all its relentless entertainment value, *The Codex* is also a book of surprising depth. It examines familial bonds between

father and sons, sibling rivalry, morality, greed and ecology. Though touching powerfully on these subjects, Preston never allows his plot to slow down in order to preach. His story makes his case for him, just as it should be.

In a world with few remaining frontiers, adventure stories like *The Codex*—at least those set in the modern world—may be on the endangered species list. Enjoy this one while you still can.

—Garrett Peck

***Crimewave 7*, edited by Andy Cox; The Third Alternative Press, 2003; 178 pgs.; \$12**

*Crimewave 7* is an elegant magazine printed book-style with heavy matte covers. With the large no-column format and heavy, glossy paper, this is a delight to hold and read. There are no illustrations, editorials, reviews, interviews or articles. This is a fiction anthology, pure and simple.

What's neither pure nor simple are the stories within. Cox has gathered up a wide range of writers, from widely-known international bestsellers to lesser-known but equally-skilled authors. *Crimewave 7* offers an ambience of dark suspense as opposed to sleuths and solutions. If you like your stories, dark, dense, heavily atmospheric, compulsively readable but in general sans a pat ending, then *Crimewave 7* is your beat. The stories are rife with unpleasant violence and unpleasant characters doing unpleasant things. Rarely does somebody get a comeuppance. If the appeal of mystery fiction for you is the sense of order restored, the sense of crime and punishment, then *Crimewave 7* is not for you.

That said, the writing in *Crimewave 7* is exciting and original. From the opening piece by Gary Couzens' 'The Missing Man', in which an accountant finds himself in the Amazon and well beyond his capacity for violence, to Tim Casson's closing story about a man in CPR training with good reason to be 'Squeamish', the reader will meet characters who shudder and judder about the physical and moral landscape without a rudder. They are directionless scum that you'd best hope not to meet. Amazingly, there are really no clinkers in this collection of fifteen stories, no stories that are less than gripping and original.

Of course, there are standouts. 'School Gate Mums', by Muriel Grey is a wonderfully nasty piece of work about the most vicious women you could hope not to meet—snooty British schoolmums who cackle and crow over the misfortunes of a woman who is less fortunate than they. Grey's prose is as crisp as a cold morning on the playground and the pain she

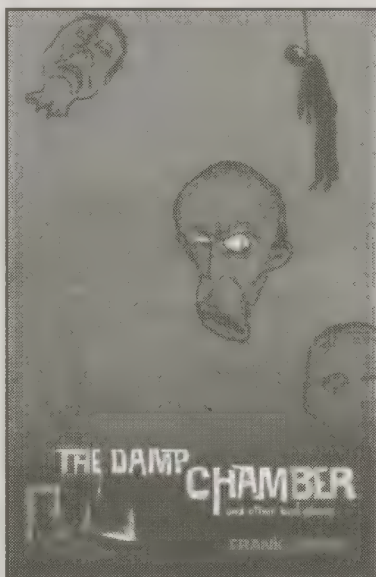
inflicts as agonizing as your first scraped knee—assuming you saw the shining white bones underneath. Steve Mohn's 'Foldouts' is a novella length work that contains a novel's worth of story. If you can imagine the scunge that sells drugs in the piss-stinking alley behind the worst bar in town, then you can start to imagine the characters that Mohn has in store for you. Given the relatively short length of the piece, it covers a lot of ground and has lots of details that you might hope to forget. Given the space, it would be easy to write about every story in this anthology. They're all memorable and well-written.

*Crimewave 7* does not contain any stories with supernatural or science fictional elements. This is straight-up unpleasant dark fiction, uncontaminated by magic realism or, in fact magic of any kind. For that, the reader will be thankful. There's nothing to dilute the power or the glory of what Cox brings to the table. Clean production and unclean humanity pair up to produce an entertainingly varied reading experience. Those who enjoy short fiction as a palate cleanser, so to speak, between novels, have a lot to look forward to—except, alas, a clean palate.

—Rick Kleffel

***The Damp Chamber*, by Frank Chigas; Medusa Press, 2004; 352 pgs.; \$40.00; 500-copy ltd. edition**

This is a beautifully produced book, visually. The cover art is reminiscent of Gahan Wilson, the rough paper material of the dust jacket is artistically chosen and well aligned. The beautiful sewn binding gives the book a very expensive, almost decadent feel, and the illustrations are well done and reproduced nicely. These



are, unfortunately, the best features of the book.

The typeface is so small it's as though they thought that if it was hard enough to read, people wouldn't notice sentences like "Henri was getting rather wearisome of Aritmus' persistent questions."—or "The dreaded Kudzu vine had swallowed the right side of the house and encroached itself onto the porch..." and wonder if it was the author, or the editor/copyeditor who didn't know what part of speech wearisome is, or that vines don't encroach themselves onto things.

The author is fond of period pieces, but his attempts to write in the speech of those periods are stilted and tedious. The modern-day pieces are better, but they aren't enough to pull the book up to the level of a forty-dollar investment. In short, this is a book you might see and be fooled into buying by its exterior, but that is lined wall-to-wall with prose sorely in need of both editor and copy-editor.

—David Niall Wilson

***Dark Harvest*, by William P. Simmons and Paul Melniczek; Undaunted Press, 2003; 76 pgs.; \$6.00**

This collaborative mini-collection of Halloween-related tales showcases work from two authors with very different styles, but despite the differences, the results are almost uniformly satisfying.

William P. Simmons contributes five of the eight stories gathered here, and brings his distinctive voice to bear on each. His style is heavily reminiscent of Ray Bradbury and more often than not Simmons does a nice job of conjuring the grandmaster of lush, evocative wordsmithing. The danger with a writer embracing a style such is that they can sometimes fall in love with the sound of their own sentences, at the expense of plotting and advancing the narrative. Simmons does sometimes seem to fall victim to this temptation, but not so often as to be off-putting. He's at his best in "The Boy Who Gathered," an enigmatic tale of a seemingly supernatural young boy's attempts to visit a dying old woman, and the old woman's concerted efforts to avoid him. The story revolves around the question of whether the boy's intentions are honorable or deceitful. "Eyes" is less successful, but "Smiles in the Dark" takes a simple image—a solitary clown appearing on the doorstep after most trick-or-treaters have gone home—and creates an impressively atmospheric tale around it. "A Face to Meet the Faces That You Meet" is a trifle ambiguous and meandering, while "The Mystery of Bags" is a brief bit about a boy whose fondness for bags extends beyond trick-or-treat bags, and serves to color his distorted perception of his surroundings.



Paul Melniczek is much more of a nuts 'n' bolts writer, largely eschewing the ornate for a more direct approach. While it's tempting to say that he embraces the traditional in both theme and approach, it's also worth noting that such a label does not translate to " clichéd." Melniczek's three contributions all feature horrors that display a certain degree of inventiveness, beginning with "Softly, the Night Whispers," wherein an elderly woman entertaining her grandson on Halloween evening is obsessively concerned with getting the porch jack o' lanterns lit before night falls. When events cause her to lose consciousness and leave the boy to fend for himself, the night becomes dark indeed. In "Darker Species," psychiatrist Stephen Rivers's attempts to allay the fears of one of his patients result in a demonstration of just how real those fears are. "Foul Moon" is a bit rougher around the edges, but the traditional elements of Halloween are well-leveraged in this story of a teens' barn party gone wrong.

A worthwhile and nicely-priced little collection, especially for lovers of Halloween fiction.

-Jack Lloyd

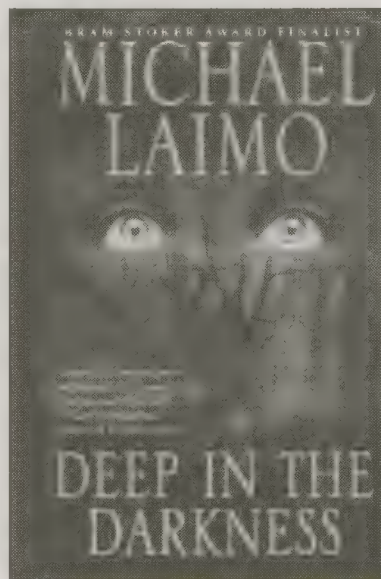
**Darker Places, by Richard Matheson;** Gauntlet Books, 2003; 224 pgs.; \$55.00

A writer whose rich imagination, intimate style, and uncompromising nature has shaped our dreams and nightmares for half a century, it is near impossible to contemplate the literature of fantasy, horror, or science-fiction without thinking of Richard Matheson. With a minimalist writing style and introspective approach to the paranormal, Matheson is widely thought responsible for revitalizing the themes and atmosphere of horror fiction, making more believable the supernatural and fantastique by moving archetypal terrors from traditional settings to next-door America. In Matheson's fiction, the monsters are more often in your living room than in graveyards, and their faces are often our own. Matheson helped horror fiction to evolve and grow, evolving to adapt to the unique fears and tensions of the modern age. To this end, many of his finest stories are concerned with paranoia, mistrust, and alienation—all emotions that the author himself has admitted to living with.

Man against the universe, be it in the form of man, machine, or specter, is one of Matheson's primary themes, and in *Darker Places*, a collection of previously unpublished novellas, short stories, and one script (*Creature*), this central idea is the major skeleton around which plots of suspense and supernatural terror are fleshed out with the author's customary attention



to psychological realism and emotional depth. Estrangement and transformation resulting through struggle are very much in evidence. Effects of terror are studied through carefully crafted characters and settings whose very ordinariness add authenticity to Matheson's side-steps into borderlands of joined reality and fantasy. "Revolution," a story where a chance encounter at a butcher's shop entices a family to wonder if the animals of their once stable world might be plotting an attack, and "The Puppy," an emotionally painful examination of the psychologically devastating relationship between a mother and her son, both explore cracks in the fabric of reality with precision and shocking effect. Love and the terrible fear of losing family casts a dark shadow over the sensitively rendered "Little Girl Knock-



ing At My Door," a deeply felt expression of the supernatural that chills and taunts in equal measure. "Cassidy's Shoes," a parable suggesting the lengths we'll go to realize our ambitions and the unwholesome agencies thus evoked, is a rare and successful example of Matheson using the conventions of folktale to tell a modern story. Throughout Matheson charts secret geographies of expressionistic nightmare and the supernatural with the heart of a child and an artist's devotion to color and texture, shading and light. Impressive attention to detail lends itself naturally to the art of terror, bringing to a literary tradition more often equated with mimicry than innovation an undeniable sense of uniqueness. While not every tale is successful, with such pieces as "The Hill" and "Intergalactic Report" appearing rushed and incomplete, the collection as a whole is a gift to devotees of dark fiction.

While Matheson's suggestion that horror has a harmful effect on the consciousness seems out of place in a collection devoted to his terror fiction, these nightmarish stories and the screenplay *Creature*, based on John Saul's novel, prove why, like it or not, Matheson will long be celebrated for his contribution to the literature of fear.

-William P. Simmons

**Deep In The Darkness, by Michael Laimo;** Leisure, 2004; 369 pgs.; \$6.99

Laimo's new novel takes place in isolated Ashborough, where internist Dr. Michael Cayle gets an opportunity to start his own practice, taking over from the previous practitioner, Dr. Farris, who was killed by a "mad dog." The move is rough; his family doesn't want to move, he has his own doubts, and then it goes from bad to worse as a neighbor offers him an obtuse taste of his future with an even more obtuse warning.

Cayle finds it odd that Farris has had his office outfitted with impenetrable steel doors and a locked refrigerator with some truly toxic bacteria samples. The novel unfolds as Cayle finds out why the populace of Ashborough live in fear and why locals suffer violent and nasty deaths, all while his family is threatened and completely disintegrates. There are passages where the paranoia and fear is damn near palpable. Instead of just layering on the gore and the body count, Laimo goes more for suspense, and the creepiness factor goes clean off of the scale.

The secret is an old one, but it's all how you use it that counts and Laimo uses it well. The novel is compulsive reading for the last hundred pages and I couldn't put it down...only to nearly throw it across

the room when I was done as frustration overtook me near the finish line.

Laimo employs a lame gimmick in the telling of this story by having his narrator relate it all on cassette after the fact. While this could have worked if used in real time, it doesn't work here, because on page two Cayle tells us that he has failed, he has lost his family...and we then get to read all 369 pages already knowing the ending; but even this could have been overlooked if, after all, *something* had been accomplished. Laimo is better than this—there's some real nail-biting stuff here, his characters are real, and he had me caring about even the minor ones.

The problems could easily have been fixed if Laimo's editors had done their job, and had insisted on revisions, because between pages seven and 358 this book just rocks, before it trips and falls down at the finish line.

—Mark Louis Baumgart

***The Doorkeepers*, by Graham Masterton; Leisure Books, 2003; 371 pgs.; \$6.99**

*"Jack be nimble, Jack be quick  
Jack jump over the candle stick"*

Did you ever wonder what the meaning of this nursery rhyme is? Veteran shockmeister Graham Masterton has an interesting theory indeed.

American Josh Winward is devastated to receive a phone call from England telling him his sister's mutilated body has been found floating in the Thames River. He and his wife Nancy cross the pond, only to find the mystery of Julia Winward's death deepen. She apparently worked for a company that's been out of business for sixty years, and lived at an address that hasn't existed since WWII. The British police seem sincere, but don't have any real leads. Josh and Nancy begin their own investigation, leading them to a young psychic named Ella who had known Julia. Ella also knows an occult ritual that opens the doorway between parallel universes and teaches it to them. Convinced Julia's killer travels between the dimensions, Jack takes a leap into an alternate London ruled by a strict religious order in hopes of bringing his sister's killer to justice. But where there are doors, there must be doorkeepers. Josh will be lucky to make it back to his own time and place.

Masterton remains one of horror's most original plotters, bringing energy and ideas to the concept of similar but disparate worlds co-existing side by side. If the universe were actually a conglomeration of infinite possibilities, how powerful would the men who control the doorways and travel between them be? How deeply would such power corrupt?

A big concept needs a skillful writer to pull it off, and Masterton is more than up to the challenge. He lays a solid grounding in the everyday world, slowly but surely introducing his fantastic elements at just the right clip to pull the reader in and allow them to suspend their disbelief when the tale starts taking some wild turns. His skills at characterization, whether ordinary or eccentric, serve him in good stead. His heroes are worth cheering for, and his villains are fun to hate. For these and other reasons, Masterton remains on the short list of horror writers whose latest books hit the stands as instant "must reads."

—Garrett Peck

***Even Odder: More Stories to Chill the Heart*, by Steve Burt; Burt Creations, 2003; 132 pgs.; \$14.95**

Steve Burt appears to be a rarity—an ex-minister and storyteller who's not afraid to explore the dark side for the purpose of giving readers thrills and chills. He's willing to send his characters there to teach them lessons, yes, but also just for the joy of telling scary stories, or stories that lean in the direction of eerie, with occasional stops at plain bizarre.

In this fifteen story follow-up to the Young Adult collection *Odd Lot: Stories to Chill the Heart*, Burt tells of old men and children, both innocent and not-so, doing normal things or strange things, but then having to cope as even stranger events occur. Burt's short stories are plain of language and straightforward, mostly devoid of stylistic tricks. They jump right into the action without frills or unwarranted distractions, but then they meander down narrow, uncharted corridors—often ending up nowhere near where you might expect.

Some of the better tales include "The Peanut Harvest," where the great concept of fingers and thumbs found among peanut shells ends very weirdly indeed, and "Caretaker," in which an apprentice learns what his uncle actually mows in a potter's cemetery (for convicted felons). "Door Number Three" proves that an overgrown nose hair can be very unsettling, while in "The Camp," three boys break into a house and find a real "pool table" and its grotesque contents. Surreal is the order of the day in "Visitation Rights," in which a baby is kidnapped by a gorilla, and in "Neighborhood Watch" two old men investigate an odd factory break-in. In the more traditional "Carousel," a nervous father glimpses the creatures who ride his children's backs on the merry-go-round, and in "Beneath the Streets," boys square off against giant rats and their sibling in a storm drainage tunnel. Old favorites like the vampire, the Wendigo, the banshee,

and even the animated ventriloquist's puppet make appearances, but in untraditional ways.

The collection is surprisingly uncompromising, considering the youthful audience at which it's aimed. Narrated with enviable simplicity and directness, the stories can be enjoyed by readers of all ages, providing they're willing to part with the normal and accept the weird. *Even Odder* was a finalist for the Young Readers 2003 Bram Stoker Award, and deservedly so. Excellent illustrations by the talented Jessica Hagerman could easily have been doubled in number. Steve Burt's attraction for the eerie seems obvious and genuine—as a training ground for more adult tales of horror and the bizarre, this grouping can't be beat.

—William D. Gagliani

***Exorcising Angels*, by Simon Clark and Tim Lebbon; Earthling Publications, 2003; 87 pgs.; \$35**

This mini-collection from two of the UK's hottest horror authors features a collaborative title novella along with a solo story and Introduction by Lebbon, and a solo story and Afterword by Clark. The novella is clearly the centerpiece, and with good reason. It's a measured, atmospheric tale, set in December, 1940 London, during the Blitz. As bombs relentlessly fall on all sides and fires burn unchecked, Delamare Smith arranges a meeting with the esteemed author Arthur Machen. Smith seeks the writer's audience in order to inquire about his inspiration for his famed but controversial tale "The Bowmen," which was published in 1914. Smith's interest—nay, obsession—with the story arises from his experiences in the trenches of World War I, where he witnessed a phenomenon that he believes to be the real-life actualization of Machen's supernatural construct in "The Bowmen." Machen is at first less than cooperative, and always enigmatic, leading Smith on a strange trail through the demolished city. "Exorcising Angels" is truly immersive; a wonderful piece of history-inspired fiction, not least because it should draw more attention to Machen's work, which too few contemporary readers are familiar with.

The other stories are not as outstanding, but still worthwhile. In Lebbon's "Skins," the protagonist Daniel is obsessed with hidden realities and secret faces beneath the world's surface veneer. Clark's "A Bridge to Everywhere" is a nicely-framed bit (and one with further Machen references) about a man whose life takes a decided turn for the worse. On a nostalgic whim, he decides to pass by his boyhood home, but street construction forces him to climb an old railway bridge and view

the neighborhood from a new perspective, one that seems to indicate that maybe, *just maybe*, you can go home again. The Intro and Afterword, although brief, are far from fluff; both are quite engaging.

The title novella tends to dwarf the other contributions here, in terms of both length and quality, but that's OK because the novella alone is worth the price of admission. And as is to be expected from Earthling Publications, the book's production values are top-notch, as is the wonderful cover art by Edward Miller.

-Jack Lloyd

***Fears Unnamed*, by Tim Lebbon; Leisure, 2003; 337 pgs.; \$6.99**

Lebbon here offers four novellas—"Remnants," "The Unfortunate," and two post-apocalyptic visions dealing with unknown viruses that have devastated humanity, "Naming of Parts," and "White."

"Parts" is the best of the latter two, as a small boy realizes that the world he knows will never be the same, and his family undertakes an odyssey to retrieve his lost sister. In the claustrophobic "White," a few surviving refugees, holed up in an isolated winter cabin, are under siege from a new lifeform. The story's only flaw is an inappropriate and downright silly sex scene.

"Unfortunate" is classic *Twilight Zone*-style material, as a man is randomly chosen by some unspecified lifeforms to be the lone survivor of a plane crash. He is informed that his luck will now be golden, but is not told of his good fortune's terrible price. "Remnants," the weakest story here, is an allegory concerning a man who gets a mysterious call from an old friend, a Peter Pan-ish archeologist, inviting him to see a fantastic new site.

Lebbon's ability to write about the here and now causes us to feel the grass crunch underfoot, the heat of a desert, and other such immersive details, and he imbues each story with a sense of ratcheting suspense. The main emotion that runs through the stories is confusion, as cataclysmic things happen, and characters who don't understand their lot try to cope, sometimes badly. Lebbon's deft touch with characterizations makes us feel their pain and confusion.

However, Lebbon's characters offer a bit of a paradox, because while we feel their pain and confusion, we never really get to know them. We never really learn their favorite foods, hobbies, colors, tv programs, etc. Bad things happen, and the characters never wonder what has happened to their family or their friends? In "White" one character thinks about his wife and in "Parts" one worries about his



sister, and that's about it. The characters sometimes feel like mysterious blank slates.

Which leads to the collection's only other flaw, which is that after you read the first two stories, you pretty much know how the other two are going to end. Still, singularly, these are powerful stories from an author in the early stages of his career. Someday he may well be regarded as one of the major talents of the new century.

-Mark Louis Baumgart

***Game*, by Conrad Williams; Earthling Publications, 2004; 80 pgs.; \$14.00**

I thought everybody had heard of Conrad Williams. I got used to seeing the name and reading his stories in *The Third Alternative*. His work has appeared in other magazines, too, like *Cemetery Dance*, and in a slew of high profile anthologies, including Datlow and Windling's *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. He has published one novel but so far it has not been widely distributed. Still, his stuff is out there, see, is what I am saying. So when I mention his name and get a blank look in return, I have to wonder about the starers—and of course feel sorry for them, because they are really missing out. Conrad Williams types a mean key.

Earthling Publications has brought out Williams's newest novella, *Game*. The plot is bizarre and a little convoluted. Rache and Fi go on a killing spree to satisfy a murderous thug who holds hostage Liam. There are reasons for the killings, of course, and motivations for Rache and Fi who otherwise would not hurt anyone, but the bits of story that get the characters going are not nearly as important here as the way Williams describes action. You can feel the desperation when you read the

lines and it makes you nervous. You can almost taste the foul meat (that's another little incidental plot element) from the words inked on the page. It is amazing. The shocking twists in plot do keep you off balance and that accounts for some of the sting in the punches, but mostly it is Williams's extraordinary writing. The dialogue, the narrative, even the damned section titles are memorable. The content is quite graphic, so be aware of that. But if you can stand the harsh framing, you are in for a ferocious adventure.

Later in 2004, the Do-Not Press is releasing Conrad Williams's second novel, *London Revenant*. Meanwhile, *Game* gives you something to read in the waiting room.

-Wayne Edwards

***Graphic Classics: Bram Stoker; Mt Horeb, WI: Eureka Prods, 2003; 144 pgs.; \$9.95***

The seventh volume in publisher Tom Pomplin's series of illustrated adaptations of the work of classic authors, following up on previous volumes of Poe, Doyle, Wells, Lovecraft, London, and Bierce. Each generously illustrated volume presents classic stories adapted in comic and heavily illustrated text, with artwork by a collection of some of the most notable artists working in comics, book illustration, and fine arts.

The Stoker volume contains the work of 26 great artists, each of who have a distinct and very different graphic style, running from uncomplicated ink drawings (Rico Schacherl's unique characterization of "Lair Of The White Worm) and unpretentious cartoonlike depictions (the complicated simplicity of Onsmith Jeremi's graphic adaptation of "The Squaw"), to more detailed comic illustrations (Gerry Alanguilan's "The Judge's House," with its memories of John Severin and EC Comics) to the deliciously washed cartoons of Hunt Emerson, illustrating "The Vampire Hunters Guide," deftly transliterated by Pomplun from Van Helsing's vampire descriptions in *Dracula*, and Evert Geradts' beautifully artificial Carl Barks-like drawings for "The Wondrous Child."

"The Dracula Gallery" consists of 12-pages of drastically diverse illustrations taken from Stoker's iconographic novel, and these vary in style from the *New Yorker*-like stylism of Brandon Ragnar Johnson's portrayal of Dracula holding a wooden stake over one of his obese brides, Skot Olsen's wonderfully malevolent canvas of The Count menacing Harker after the latter cuts himself shaving, Michael Manning's compelling ink-and-screen drawing of Dracula's brides converging upon the sleeping Harker, Jeff Gaither's wickedly fine pen-and-ink detailing of Harker holding a shovel over the awaken-

ing corpse of the coffined Count, Maxon Crumb's compellingly bizarre, almost robotic interpretation of Seward and Renfield; Todd Schorr's fine art portrayal of Nosferatu and company (detail from lavish and lovely portrait of cinematic terrors, centering around the King's triumvirate trinity of terror: the vampire, the monster, and the werewolf; which can be seen in its entirety on page 143), and Todd Lovering's Disneyesque depiction of Dracula's end at the hand of Harker, Van Helsing, Seward, and Holmwood.

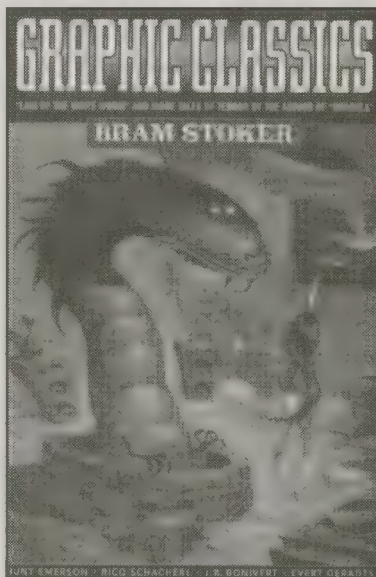
The diversity of illustration that comes to this volume—and its parent series—is rich and lovely. It's too bad some of the painted works couldn't have been presented in color, especially in the "Gallery." But, as horror writer Mort Castle notes in his cleverly-contrived introduction, *Dracula* and less famous writings of Bram Stoker have found all means of translation into various artistic media, and this volume imparts a varied compendium of illustrative interpretations, bringing to various forms of life the classic creations of Stoker's unique and vivid imagination. It also recalls that there was more to Stoker's craft than a single vampire novel, and readers can find some new richness in his other work herein.

—Randall D. Larson

*The Idol of the Flies and Other Stories*, by Jane Rice; Midnight House, 2003; 372 pgs.; \$40.00

Up until now, Jane Rice has been perhaps the most unjustly overlooked genre author of the 1930s and '40s. With ten appearances in *Unknown/Unknown Worlds*, she was truly a star of her day. Although Necronomicon Press briefly resurrected her name by publishing a chapbook of her work in 1995, Rice's work had never been collected and her name was fading into obscurity. Thanks to editors Stefan Dziemianowicz and Jim Rockhill, and publisher John Pelan, that oversight has been corrected (although, sadly, it comes slightly too late for the author to appreciate; she died March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003, while this book was in production).

If readers are previously familiar with Rice, it's likely through either the title story or "The Refugee," which are her two most frequently-reprinted stories. "The Idol of the Flies" concerns a remarkably evil young boy who ultimately gets his comeuppance; what makes the story even more remarkable is that this litany of cruelties somehow made it past the censors in 1942. "The Refugee" features an American woman whose curiosity traps her in wartorn Europe and then brings her into contact with a young man with a lupine nature. Other stories feature common



enough themes, including zombies and haunted houses, but do so in unusual and engaging fashion.

Rice's most notable skill is her remarkable faculty for creating distinctive and realistic voices for her various characters. From the dim mob kingpin "The Crest of the Wave" to the wisecracking Nick and Nora-type couple in "The Forbidden Trail," Rice manages to make every one of her characters sound fresh and unique. Really an impressive accomplishment. Another common denominator in Rice's work is her liberal use of humor, which is used to great effect in many of her stories.

With 372 pages of small type (22 stories in all), there's a lot of work here to digest. Some stories are decidedly lesser works, some are so whimsical as to seem lightweight, and many are not horror or dark in any way (which is only logical, given that Rice's writing ranged across a number of genres; this collection collects all her weird and macabre tales and seemingly a good bit more). Despite the occasional small misstep, *The Idol of the Flies* is a most welcome collection, and deserves to sell out in short order.

The package is completed with erudite essays by Dziemianowicz and Rockhill, and a fine cover by Midnight House's signature artist, Allen Koszowski.

—Jack Lloyd

*In Dark Places*, by Michael Prescott; Onyx/NAL, 2004; 384 pgs.; \$6.99

On his sixth outing, Michael Prescott has created a fascinating suspense novel with *In Dark Places*. Having reached *New York Times* Bestseller status in the past, Prescott is poised for a repeat performance with his gripping new drama.

There are many things about the novel that are commonplace in thrillers. For one,

there is a serial killer. It is true that the idea has been squeezed all but dry, and you have to be suspicious about any new serial killer book. Will it just be a rehash of what has come before? Prescott's serial killer is not shockingly original, or even all that new, but he is a functional villain. It is the other plot elements and characters that make the novel better than the average of its kind. For instance, Robin Cameron is a psychiatrist trying to rehabilitate criminals. While she is not a completely believable character, she is entertaining to read about (sort of like a actor or actress, who you think is probably an airhead in real life, playing a doctor or a lawyer in a movie—they are not necessarily believable in the role but they might still be fun to watch in the film). And then there is the shell-shocked police officer, Alan Brand, who suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome. With the misery heaped on him you figure he has to be a good guy, but the way Prescott tells the story, Brand's true nature is in question all along. In fact, the plot twist near the end of the book is an actual surprise—not a given in thrillers these days. Thinking back on it after the revelation, well, of course it makes sense. But reading it the first time leaves you sucking in your breath.

I am a little surprised to see this book coming out as a paperback original. Given the author's track record, I would have thought a hardcover edition would precede the paperback. In any case, the book is worth reading. And at a mass market paperback price, it is a steal. Recommended.

—Wayne Edwards

*Killing Demons* by Peter Siegel & Brent White; Engine Press, 2003; 88 pgs., \$8.95

*Killing Demons* started out as treatment for a television series that author Peter Siegel came up with a few years ago, a kind of inverted *Kolchak The Night Stalker* in which you have the monster fighter not looking in at the pervasive supernatural world, but instead he is looking out from in the very midst of it. Merged with elements of *Dark Shadows* and, to my thinking, anyway, a few equal parts of both *MEN IN BLACK* and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, Siegel's premise has found its home not on television but in perhaps the far creepier world of the graphic novel. Collaborating with artist Brent White, Siegel's story of demon killer Joshua Brand comes to life on the printed page, which publisher Engine Press is aptly billing as a "B-horror film on paper." The narrative is concise, the dialog exacting, and White's nicely washed black and white illustrations give the story its suitably cinematic character.

Brand is recruited by police detective Sarah Bentley to help solve a series of brutal killings. Naturally they turn out to be connected with the kind of ubiquitous demons that Brand has been associated (one might even say, "branded") with all of his life. Mayhem, mystery, and mutilation ensue. It's wonderful stuff.

Siegel, co-founder and editor of *www.artbomb.com*, an advocacy site promoting "diverse and sophisticated graphic novels," has written a straightforward and rapid-paced detective-styled script and gives it an interesting if awkwardly set-up twist at the denouement. Siegel also provides a foreword and afterword wherein he alludes to and then includes minireviews of 20 of his favorite horror films. It's a fitting extra feature, since elements of each of them have contributed to what has become *Killing Demons*, and the story is such a cinematic one—as is the art form that has embraced it—that Siegel's list of faves is a suitable coda to his tale.

White's drawings are stark and straightforward. The noir-ish elements are unmistakably with his thick and shadowy black-and-white graphic technique. Shadows loom and fade from a gray wash to a glaring contrast of dark and light, which complements Siegel's dialog and brief narrative very well, better in fact that a color scheme would have. The story washes over the reader in a gloom of murky darkness that retains a lot more class than had a vivid, crimson-colored palette been emphasized. The art design is paced deliberately, alternating slowly developing exposition with rapid-paneled surges of violent action. It's a brutal story, uncompromising in its depiction of demons, detectives, and destroyers alike, and Siegel and White have made a fine little horror show here.

—Randall D. Larson

***Market Forces*, by Richard Morgan; Victor Gollancz, 2004; 385 pgs.; £10.99**

Chris Faulkner, the main character of Richard Morgan's brutally satiric novel *Market Forces*, represents the end point of an economic evolution already well underway. He's a well-turned heel who must, in the progress of the novel, learn to re-define his "conscience" as that which preserves him at any price. *Market Forces* carefully, cheerfully coerces the reader into rooting for Faulkner's ruthless elimination of anything remotely resembling a conscience, a heart or empathetic identification with your fellow human beings. It turns out that survival of the fittest is the best hope for mankind's continued survival. As long as you're on the right end of the baseball bat.

As *Market Forces* begins, Chris has just landed a plum job. He's moved on from Emerging Markets at Hammett McColl and into Conflict Investment with Shorn Associates, the UK's leading mercenary investment firm. His big kill at H&M earned him quite a reputation in that firm. But backing up five times over the body of a dead banker only gets him to the bottom of the ladder at Shorn. Fortunately, Mike Bryant, who himself is clearly partner material at Shorn, takes Chris under his wing. Chris's wife, Carla, is his ace in the hole. She's a mechanic who has modified his Saab with her own brand of distanced armor, which keeps his car lightweight, maneuverable and deadly. But Chris's direct supervisor, Louise Hewitt, dislikes and distrusts him. She thinks he's soft. Chris might be a superstar executive, if only he can manage to survive.

Morgan's setup synthesizes a number of influences from both sides of the academic divide. He cites sources such as Noam Chomsky, John Pilger, Joseph Stiglitz and William Easterly. But Morgan borrows as easily from the bottom as the top, so with your high-minded economic influences, you'll find a seamless integration of breathtakingly funny B-movie violence. Start your engines with 'Death Race 2000' and finish the game with 'Mad Max' as corporate economists fight for their right to oversee overseas accounts with hopped-up BMW battle-wagons.

The glue that holds all this together is Chris Faulkner. If Morgan is to succeed in his satiric intentions, he's got to keep his reader squarely on Faulkner's side. Faulkner starts out as a likable guy with a conscience, if not a heart of gold, in a world that demands violence. By the time we really like him, the reader realizes that this guy is going to need to wield that baseball bat if he's to survive. And we're there for him every step of the way. Morgan manages to hit a home run with his inverse journey from kind-of good to uber-bad. We cheer the character, laugh at the excess and think about the implications of it all in the safety of our homes.

It's not surprising that *Market Forces* is a wild ride. But we all live in Morgan's world, where road rage and government-sponsored terrorism betting pools are newspaper fodder. We're all subject to *Market Forces*. Few of them however, are as enjoyable as this novel. Fewer still have done as much for baseball.

—Rick Kleffel

***Memorial Day*, by Harry Shannon; Five Star Mysteries and Thorndike Press, 2004; \$24.95**

*Memorial Day* is one of the better *noir* novels I have read lately. It is the first novel

of this type from Harry Shannon, whose name you might recognize from his 2002 novel *Night of the Beast*, or *Night of the Werewolf* which came out the following year. Shannon, in fact, has written quite a lot for magazines like *City Slab* and *Horror Garage* (and *Cemetery Dance*), as well as for the occasional anthology. According to his bio, he has also worked widely in Hollywood and Europe in music-related endeavors. He almost seems to be one of those reckless talents who can do well on a number of different trajectories and, as a result, cannot decide which he likes best. Maybe he doesn't have to decide. After all, if he can please different audiences time and again why not spread the wealth? It certainly seems to be working.

The main character in *Memorial Day* is Mick Callahan, a once-famous fellow who has fallen on hard times after an unlikely turn of events. In uneven surroundings facing an uncertain future, Callahan lands in more trouble as each day passes. Conflicted by the drive and desire to help and the need for self-preservation, Mick has to make hard choices that have profound impacts on himself and the people around him. What makes the novel especially good is the complexity of the characters. Mick's thought process exists in a maelstrom of contradiction. Is his desire to help altruistic or does it stem from guilt? Is it more important for him to return to the limelight or to defeat his personal demons? Shannon reveals the story to us slowly, but the book never drags. The author creates genuine tension by keeping us interested in the characters so we want to know what will happen to them next. That is what makes *Memorial Day* a page-turner.

The dialogue is snappy and realistic without being too aware of itself—the people in the story actually seem to be talking to each other rather than reading lines, if you see what I mean. Every author tries to achieve this effect, but they are not always successful. Harry Shannon's *noir* debut is a good read all the way around. Recommended.

—Wayne Edwards

***More Tomorrow and Other Stories*, by Michael Marshall Smith; Earthling Publications, 2003; 487 pgs.; \$40**

I would say that Michael Marshall Smith is a national treasure, but I believe that complimentary turn of phrase is intended to be used to refer to one's countryman, and Smith is a Brit while I am not.

I would say that Smith is a true gem of our genre, but his talent often extends beyond the boundaries of horror and into realms such as science fiction and main-

stream, as evidenced by his novels and some of the stories here.

Rather than continue to futilely cast about for the proper descriptor, I'll just say that if you're reading this magazine, I can't imagine why you wouldn't want to own this book (*maybe* if you already owned his UK-published collection *What You Make It*, but this collection expands significantly on the earlier one). Smith is that good, combing a mellifluous style with subtly shrewd observations on life and the human condition.

*More Tomorrow* collects 31 stories, spanning 1988 to 2003 and including all of the classics that you'd expect, all the award-winners and "Year's Best" selections. Take, for example, "The Man Who Drew Cats," a moving story that's even more remarkable given that it was Smith's first sale, which concerns an enigmatic artist whose chalk sidewalk drawings seem to take on a life of their own when confronted with a child's cruel mistreatment. "Later" is a quintessentially sad story about a man whose love for his dead wife reinfuses both her body and the zombie genre. The title story is an exercise in dawning terror and tension, as the narrator discovers that a female coworker is being depicted in an ongoing series of photos on the Net, starting with simple nudity and graduating to S&M and more. "Open Doors" and "More Bitter than Death" masterfully manipulate the reader's expectations, as seemingly likeable and trustworthy narrators turn out to be anything but. And in the bitter-sweet "Dear Alison," even the tired trope of vampires receives a welcome turn as Smith turns perspective on its head. I could go on and on, but hopefully you get the picture...

Four stories appear here for the first time, and topping everything off is an engaging, humorous Afterword by Smith, entitled "On Not Writing."

Who wouldn't want a copy?

-Jack Lloyd

*A New Universal History of Infamy*, by Rhys Hughes; Ministry of Whimsey, 2004; 181 pgs.; \$25

#### Introduction to the Review

While most book reviews do not require an introduction, this one most certainly will. There will be those who will accuse me of inventing this book; that is, of reviewing an imaginary book in the style of Jorge Luis Borges. It is true; I've done this before, and I intend to do so again. However, in this case, I must assure the reader that the book being reviewed is not imaginary. But for a significant percentage—in fact, for the majority of the world's population—*A New Universal History of Infamy* will remain fully in the realm of

the imagined. As a reviewer then, it is my responsibility to fill their imagination as precisely as possible with a simulacrum of the real thing.

#### A Description of Reality

While books themselves are not required to describe reality, book reviews are. However, the work submitted for my approval—and I most certainly approved, to the point where my laughter while reading the work disturbed those around me and caused them to cast irritated or alarmed glances in my direction—could not be considered entirely real. That's because *A New Universal History of Infamy*, dispenses fact as fiction and fiction as fact to a degree which makes it hazardous to presume any authorial intent. The words swirl, the worlds swirl, the readers' brains swirl, and if you're not dizzy with delight at Hughes' concoction then you're likely puking your guts out in a back alley with horror and disorientation.

If the latter is your reaction, wipe your chin, pick up the book and begin again. You're enjoying yourself, trust me. Would I lie to you?

#### Egregious Self-Referentialism

By now, even the most patient readers of reviews are grinding their teeth, hoping the reviewer will just get to the plot summary portion of the review. This would presume that there's a plot to summarize. However, in this book of created histories, the author eschews plot for hilarious and extremely gory snapshots of his faux historical characters. Do not read this work in situations where extraneous laughter might be interpreted as a hostile gesture, unless you like a good fight.

#### But Wait—There's More! This Isn't It, However

Not content to simply make the reader laugh at the invented histories of fictional creations, the author displays either an encyclopedic knowledge of the last 1,000 years of history—or a facility for lying which suggests he ought to seek a job in government.

Hughes has created something utterly unique here, were it not based directly on the work of another author. While I'm not familiar with the particular work being referenced here, I have read the author's name—Jorge Luis Borges, and even in a previous paragraph, written that name as if I was intimately familiar with his work. Whether or not that is the case is left as an exercise for the reader to determine.

#### Final SubHead: More Has Arrived, So Has Hughes

Yes, there's more—a lot more to Hughes' creation. Suffice it to say that *A New Universal History of Infamy* includes not only hilarious histories of people no sane reader would hope to have existed, but

also a series of parodies, surplus parodies, parodies of parodies and even a parody of itself such as one the reader might wish to write after reading it. It will be snatched from the grocery racks as if it were a tabloid claiming evidence of alien alterations to our historical record. It is in fact an alien alteration of our historical record. For the record, it's nice to know that the aliens have a sense of humor. It will serve them well in their dealings with humanity.

-Rick Kleffel

*Nightscape*, by David Morrell; Subterranean Press, 2004; Limited \$35, Lettered \$150

Except for the novels *The Totem*, *Testament*, and *Long Lost*, David Morrell has chosen the short story as his primary vehicle when exploring the horrific. Many of these outstanding shorter works were collected in 1992's *Black Evening*. Now, that volume has a welcome companion, *Nightscape*.

Although the stories in each display Morrell's trademark "you are there" immediacy, each book has its own unique qualities. *Black Evening* is a collection of stories that initially saw print between 1972 and 1992, while most of the stories in *Nightscape* were published during the past decade. The stories in *Black Evening* tend toward the supernatural, whereas those in *Nightscape* are more realistic. Finally, whereas the stories in the former vary in length, running the gamut from short stories to novellas, the pieces in the latter are mostly very long. In fact, "If I Should Die Before I Wake" and "Rio Grande Gothic" are almost mini-novels.

In his intimate introduction, Morrell explains that the stories in *Nightscape* consider the themes of obsession and determination. While those elements play varying roles in each tale, an even deeper theme, that of individual identity, ties these stories together. It's a prominent theme of "Remains To Be Seen," where the protagonist sees himself as a loyal servant, willing to do whatever it takes to fulfill his promise, "Nothing Will Hurt You," which focuses on a father who feels he has not met his responsibilities to his murdered daughter, and "Elvis .45," in which a rabid fan of "The King" loses himself in idol worship.

This motif presents itself repeatedly in the remaining stories. In "Habitat" and "Front Man," the protagonists struggle merely to maintain their identities. In "Resurrection," the main characters redefine themselves to cope with radically changed circumstances. Finally, in "If I Die Before I Wake" and "Rio Grande Gothic," the characters' professions, physician and lawman,

respectively, dictate their responses to extraordinary circumstances.

Writing with clarity and intensity, Morrell uses these tales to explore a wide variety of emotions and behaviors, including devotion, betrayal, grief, joy, and, yes, obsession and determination. Unsettling but also moving, the stories in *Nightscape* are yet another reminder of Morrell's ability to peer deeply into his characters' psyches, a rare talent that makes his work essential reading for horror fans and general audiences alike.

—Hank Wagner

***Pain Machine*, by Marcy Italiano; Cosmos Books, 2003; 177 pgs.; \$15.00**

Marcy Italiano's short fiction has been notable wherever it has appeared for its emotional resonance. The same holds true for her excruciating and exquisite debut novel, *Pain Machine*.

When Dr. Veronica Laka was ten, her father punished her for talking back by gently tapping a nail under each of her fingernails. She could not make her mother believe it hurt as much as it did. This experience led to her lifelong obsession to invent a machine that allows doctors to feel pain exactly as their patients do. Hailed as a diagnostic tool that will save the lives of those who can't communicate with their doctors, the so-called "pain machine" requires doctors to "go under the wires" and suffer just as their patients do.

Young bride Agatha Mc Boris suffers from an unknown malady that causes her paralyzing pain for which no doctor can find a cause, putting a terrible strain on her nascent marriage. Dr. Laka's machine may be the only way she can prove her pain is not all in her mind.

Italiano deftly examines the morality and ethics her fictional device would pose to the medical community, examining it from the perspective of its inventors, clinicians and hospital administration, as well as from the perspective of patients who could benefit from its use and hypochondriacs who would abuse it. Interspersed between chapters are "death journals" from those who might have benefited from the machine had they not died before it was available.

This book's real accomplishment is its depiction of the effect of chronic pain on those that suffer from it. We are always alone with our pain. It's hard for others to understand what it's like when they can't feel the hurt as we do. When no immediate medical cause for pain can be diagnosed, there's a rush to believe it's really "all in their head". The anguish of having your sanity questioned by those that care about you can be as taxing to the spirit as the pain itself.

Italiano might not have the same medical education as Robin Cook or Michael Palmer, but she proves she can stand toe to toe with these doctor/authors on inventiveness and page-turning suspense. It's not often a first novel begs to be read in a single sitting, but *Pain Machine* demands it. I made the mistake of starting it at bedtime and couldn't put it down until it was over. Easily one of the strongest debuts of '03, this involving medical thriller showcases the voice of an author who should be listened to—even when it hurts.

—Garrett Peck

***Pine Shallow (The Serpent Prophecies)*, by Darrin Wilson; Andromeda, 2003; 337 pgs.; \$24.99**

*Pine Shallow* is a fast-paced, interesting read. The beginning is a good hook—Catholic Priest killed by unknown evil, always a winner. There are some problems, though. After the initial blast of action, the reader is faced with two things—a lot of information thrown in quickly, and apparently only for the purpose of getting it across to the reader quickly so it doesn't have to be "shown" through the prose, and a series of events that blast holes in the ability to suspend disbelief.

When supernatural events draw in elements from the characters and cities surrounding them, the reactions of those characters and cities have to be believable, and in this case, events that would send most of us screaming into the streets (trees uprooting and moving without sound or any means of doing so, and all the mirrors going black...) are handled by Blackwood, the protagonist, as odd, but not enough to lose sleep over.

There are some memorable characters here, and the plot—the notion that there are people born without souls who can be manipulated by dark forces (including the crewmen of Christopher Columbus)—is fresh. The main character and his son, as well as the book dealer, paranormal investigators, and evil enemy, are all well-drawn, believable characters. The action, once the story gets going, is well-paced and builds steadily toward a very tight conclusion. Overall, if you can get past the beginning of this, it's an entertaining read. Wilson shows great promise, and is a voice to be watched for.

—David Niall Wilson

***The Place Called Dagon*, by Herbert Gorman; Hippocampus Press, 2003; 187 pgs.; \$14.00**

*The Place Called Dagon* was published in 1927 by Gorman, a mainstream literary author, and according to S.T. Joshi it is a "distinguished" work, is "thoroughly entertaining and substantial," and may

have "influenced" H.P. Lovecraft in the writing of some of his more famous stories.

Wow. Wouldn't I like to read a novel like that. I sure would like to, because *Dagon* just ain't it.

The plot is pedestrian and clichéd at best. A young doctor, Doctor Dreeme (!), moves into the cloistered and forgotten town of Marborough only to find that he doesn't fit in. Two years later, he is summoned to the house of a local hermit because of a gunshot accident (the cause of which is never really explained), where he finds that there is something terrible happening/about to happen, from which he is being excluded. With the additional shoehorning of a woman-in-jeopardy, romantic-angle subplot, the novel is off and shambling with all the gusto of a dead turtle.

An example of Gorman's tediousness can be seen in a three-page rumination by Dreeme on his fellow characters and the eating of corned beef and cabbage. Something of interest finally happens around the hundred page mark, but Gorman even manages to make a grotesque murder dull. After this bit of non-excitement, the novel continues to go nowhere, slowly and tediously, until Dreeme's gal pal is unsurprisingly kidnapped for a pagan sacrifice, but by then it's too little, too late to save the story.

Character development is nil; what you read is what you get. Dreeme is naïve to the point of being a dolt, the bad guy is a your typical megalomaniac, and everybody else is characterized more by mannerisms than anything else. This clichéd novel was clearly an attempt at writing a commercial gothic, and is written by somebody without a clue as to how to write commercial fiction. Gorman wrote about a half dozen novels, all of which have long since been forgotten—and if *Dagon* is any example, justifiably so.

Lovecraft called this novel "puerile", he was being generous. Not recommended for even the most fervent Lovecraftian, horror, or gothic collectors.

—Mark Louis Baumgart

***Postcards From Terri*, by Tony Richards; Sarob Press, 2004; 108 pgs.; \$37.50**

*Cemetery Dance* readers should be familiar with Tony Richards, based on his four appearances in the magazine of late, and this exceptional novella only expands upon the strengths shown in his shorter works in these very pages.

Narrator Steve Corlingsten is a down-in-the-mouth and somewhat down-on-his-luck tv scriptwriter (a "hack," in his own words) still looking to rebound from his relatively recent divorce. His ex-wife's

announcement that she's pregnant and getting married doesn't exactly serve to perk up Steve's spirits any. What *does* lift his spirits, though, is the apparent appearance of a true "spirit," as in ghost.

Terri Champion was a remarkably beautiful young woman with an independent streak and a restless spirit (there's that word again) who became best friends with Steve in college. He always wished for more than friendship, but it never came to pass. Now, after a dozen years of receiving postcards from across the globe from the peripatetic Terri, Steve gets word that she has died. Shortly thereafter, she appears in his dreams...and her presence seems to linger even after he wakes. Soon, Steve is regularly having full-on conversations with a version of Terri who seems neither alive nor dead. Seeing her again brings back all his old feelings, but he also feels a growing unease about her presence. As the story unfolds, the reader comes to see that too much of Steve's life is about lost dreams, poisonous regret, and vicarious thrills.

Richards debuted with a supremely entertaining first novel, *The Harvest Bride*, all the way back in 1987, and his publications since then have been too few and far between. *Postcards From Terri* is an all-too-rare opportunity to savor his talents at greater lengths. Highly recommended.

(The packaging of this small trim-size hardcover is also notable, with printed boards featuring artwork by Paul Lowe, and strong production values throughout.)

-Jack Lloyd

*Prelude to Armageddon*, by Cleve Cartmill, Darkside Books, 2003; 276 pgs., \$40.00

Entertaining and thoughtful, Cartmill's concise style and swift pacing are the ideal aesthetic tools with which to carve intimate moments of terror and awe from larger-than-life dilemmas of power struggle and mistrust. A unique blend of fancy, adventure, and terror permeates these eleven stories, and Cartmill's no-nonsense commitment to well crafted characters and tightly woven plots mirrors the age of pulp fiction within which they were written, favoring action-packed plots and break-neck speed. Themes of governmental distrust, paranoia, and a malignant universe are milked as much for sub-text as surface excitement. Many of these dystopian warnings and supernaturally charged fables interweave moments of philosophical introspection amidst the pleasurable chills and thrills of action sequences that just never let up.

While technology and science are impressively represented in these eleven stories, *people* are the major focus, lending

tales of tragedy, satire, and horror as much relevance today as when they were published sixty years ago in such legendary magazines as *Unknown Worlds* and *Super Science Fiction*. Cartmill is concerned first and foremost with *story*, not *type*. One of the chief pleasures in his work is variety of approach and his ability to represent various emotions. From the emotional tautness and technical terror of military speculative fiction to surprisingly grim violence, Cartmill is captured in many different moods by Pelan's selection.

One of a group of influential authors selected by editor John W. Campbell to fill his two magazines—*Astounding Science Fiction* and *Unknown Fantasy Fiction*—with plausible and unique scientific/extrapolation concepts supporting elements of the incredible or futuristic, using science to lend credibility to fantasy elements, Cartmill imbued his work with a consistent mistrust of government and cooperate business, making him an earlier practitioner of conspiracy fiction. In "Deadline," a piece as recognizable for the government panic it caused as for its prophetic plot, governmental menace is emphasized as Ybar Sebrof parachutes into the hostile territory of the Nilreq during a global war to defuse an atomic bomb. Big business abuse and the threats of organized power structures are further regarded as demonic soul stealers in "Cabal," a parable of governmental tyranny and rebellion with a twist of hope at the end, and several stories where the individual is forced to battle oppressive corruption sponsored by the very institutions initially created to protect freedoms. If it was rather scary to see reflected in several of these stories the social blindness, ignorant mob mentality, and governmental corruption of our own



age, it was delightful to experience the shivers evoked by the author's descriptive language.

Just as capable of crafting torturous moments of emotional pain and the unreal as he was at working within the parameters of scientific possibility, Cartmill displays a genius for revitalizing archetypes. In "The Bargain," a quiet sense of despair and unfairness resounds throughout a parable wherein the angel of death recounts to a potential suicide to what length god goes to protect his secret of immortality. A sense of folk-tale atmosphere and grinning tragedy lends the story a timeless air, while powerhouse terror is the focus of such pieces as "My Lady Smiles," a short vignette of murder, wishes granted, and a horribly ironic ending. Effective in plotting and execution, these stories are uniformly enjoyable and thoughtful

-William P. Simmons

*Rage*; by Steve Gerlach; Bloodletting Press; 2003; 310 pgs.; \$45

If you haven't been introduced to Australian master of thrills and terror Steve Gerlach through his previously published novels, *The Nocturne* or *Love Lies Dying*, then maybe you'll recognize him as the webmaster of the official Richard Laymon website, *Richard Laymon Kills*. Strangely enough, *Rage* was written long before his two other novels saw the light of day and before *Richard Laymon Kills* surfaced on the web. This can be attributed to the fact that Gerlach locked *Rage* in a closet for over a decade, as he explains in his introduction.

From page one, we learn of the hardships faced by the protagonist, Ben, a young college student, as he is turned down by a girl he likes. Everyone's been there, everyone has felt that pain. For Ben, the pain only worsens day by day as he is faced with self-esteem issues, rejection from childhood friends, and depression brought upon by frustration with school, girls, and his lack of friends.

The pain and ache Ben feels are the same that most everyone deals with at some point, and it is because of this that we are drawn to him and his plight to be accepted by society. We are so absorbed in Ben's life because we learn to care about him.

It is after he is turned down by yet another girl that we start to see another side of him. His pain is increasingly turned into anger as he starts thinking such things to himself as "I have to prove myself" and the lingering phrase "I'll make sure they all remember".

Appropriately enough, it is at this time we enter into part two of the book, titled "Countdown." We watch as Ben



slowly turns into a monster, page by page, and that's what makes this book so scary. Ben, a ticking time-bomb, could be our neighbor, family member, friend, or even ourselves.

Gerlach then throws us for a loop when he allows Ben some happiness in a relationship that completely takes over Ben's life. The monster inside Ben goes into hiding as he finds hope in what he believes to be his best friend and the reason for him to keep on going.

But of course with the title of the book being *Rage*, it couldn't be left at that, right? It's up to you to find out what happens. I won't spoil it for you. Just know that the climactic end is not to be missed!

It should not be a huge surprise that this uncut version of *Rage*, containing the author's preferred text and which was turned down in Gerlach's own Australia, varies significantly from the Leisure mass-market paperback release. If you want the real deal, here it is folks!

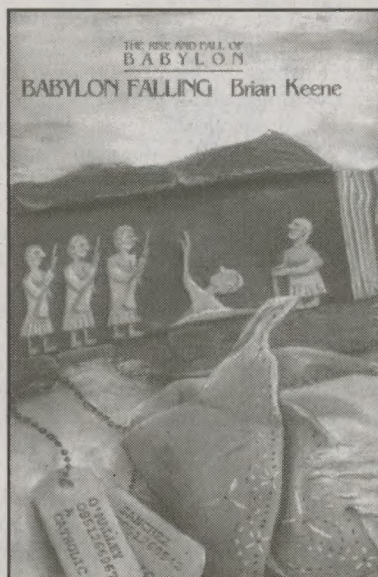
*Rage* has everything: characters we relate to, love and care for, a suspenseful plot that keeps you flipping the pages, and sharp and flowing prose. Not to mention originality, humor, and disturbing scenes that would shock even the King of Gross-Out, Edward Lee. And as if this wasn't enough to make you buy a book, the icing on the cake would be the phenomenal cover art by Caniglia, an introduction by author Simon Clark, superb design and layout by Necro Publications' David G. Barnett, and packaging by the outstanding up-and-comer publisher, Bloodletting Press.

—Jonathan Reitan

*The Rise and Fall of Babylon*, by Brian Keene and John Urbancik; Earthling Publications, 2003; 47 pgs.; \$11.00

I never thought to put together Brian Keene and John Urbancik as a duo. Their individual styles seem divergent to me: each with his own merits, but different. I was surprised, then, by the chapbook double *The Rise and Fall of Babylon*, which showcases one story each from these two new(ish) writers. One of the tales is "Babylon Rising" (Urbancik) and the other is "Babylon Falling" (Keene). It is kind of a cool idea to present opposite ends of a story this way—or opposing viewpoints, or separate interpretations, or what have you. In this framework there are many potential directions to go. I figured it would be interesting to see what the authors did with such a set-up. So I read the stories.

Urbancik's "Rising" story has Gabriel being whisked away magically to the historic (read: mythical) Babylon from a present-day beach. There Gabriel meets a host of odd and fascinating folk and learns



he had not been living his life right back on the beach. In Keene's "Falling" story, the action begins with the military incursion into Iraq, March 2003. Eighty percent of the story is an account of military adventure. Near the end, our main characters find themselves captured and stood up as sacrifices to ancient supernaturals.

What do these two stories have in common? Apart from one throwaway line at the end of the "Rising" story, absolutely nothing. They are each all right on their own—I do not *dislike* either of them. I do think it is a shame to waste such a good set-up with so much promise on nothing more than a couple of unrelated stories glooped together in a chapbook. Still, it is not completely unsatisfying as reading the stories is enjoyable enough. But it could have been so much more...

If you are looking for a nice little collectible item from Brian Keene or John Urbancik (or both), *The Rise and Fall of Babylon* is not a bad way to go.

—Wayne Edwards

*Spectre*, by Stephen Laws; Telos UK. 2003; 272 pgs.; £9.99 (pb) £30.00 (hc)

The effect of the past upon the present is a recurring theme in both mystery and horror fiction. Both genres have now been around long enough so that we can now experience this theme on two levels. Readers can now engage in nostalgic re-reading of novels in which nostalgia itself proves to be a noose.

It helps to have a compelling reason to re-read a novel, and Telos offers up several in its Telos Classic re-issue of Stephen Laws' *Spectre*. The new version is in fact pretty much Laws' original version, as submitted to his then-publisher, Souvenir Press, nearly 20 years ago. This

means that an opening chapter has been restored, and several scenes elided from the original version have been restored. It is noticeably better. The hardcover is signed and includes color plates of the various incarnations of the cover. Both include an entertaining new postscript.

As we approach middle age, we spend more and more time thinking about the past. It's not surprising. There's more of it to think of. Richard Eden is school lecturer with few roots in the present. Newly divorced from his wife, he spends his spare time drinking at the local bar brooding about the past. He favors memories of his halcyon college days, when he and six friends came together to form the Byker Chapter. When Richard experiences a moment of paranoid terror, he is convinced someone, something is following him. He digs out a photograph of the Byker Chapter. But it's no longer the same photo it once was; one of the members has now vanished from the picture. That member is dead.

Laws is quite clever at constructing his horror story. Rather than reveal in the opening precisely what is doing the killing and why, he shows us only the outward effects, and leaves the monster behind the curtain. He's also quite inventive in creating his inimical force. It's not precisely anything you've seen before. But it is clearly tied to the characters, to what happened in the past.

Laws' story is taut, stripped down and relentless. He moves the action along briskly. The first two-thirds of the novel are almost a hybrid of mystery and horror, as the characters become amateur sleuths unearthing their own past while being pursued by a variety of supernatural threats. The final third of the novel reveals the evil and resolves the past. The horror of the denouement is not as effective once the mystery is solved.

The re-issue of Stephen Laws' *Spectre* allows the readers who missed Laws' novel the first time around, and those who read it upon its original publication to experience it—and 1980's mainstream horror—in an improved form. It also offers lessons on two levels—both within the novel and in the reading experience itself—on the dangers of revisiting the past.

—Rick Kleffel

*Thunder Road*, by Tamara Thorne; Pinnacle, 2004; 352 pgs.; \$5.99

Tamara Thorne extends her streak of entertaining horror and suspense novels (*Eternity*, *Candle Bay*, *Bad Things*, *The Forgotten*) with this deliciously indescribable and uncategorizable novel of suspense. And science fiction. And horror. And religious fantasy. *Thunder Road* demonstrates again that she is one of the best tellers of

dark fantasy tall-tales, able to spin a yarn that's both outrageous and surprisingly convincing, peopled with flesh and blood characters you can't help but like and care about. And she wields her wild sense of humor like a claymore.

The town of Madelyn has always been a UFO hotspot, with secretive government types skulking about—either causing the sightings or covering them up. But now the sightings have increased dramatically, as have the animal mutilations and human disappearances. Just what is going on in this supposedly quiet California community? Eclipse, apocalypse, UFO attack, hoax? Or...?

Marie Lopez is a shepherd whose sheep disappear only to resurface hideously mutilated. Tom Abernathy, rancher and theme park owner/stuntman, observes with amused detachment until he has no choice but to get involved—because he secretly adores Marie. Carlo Pelegrine tells fortunes at the Madland theme park, but hides a secret so horrifying it has kept him celibate for decades. Justin Martin's all-American high school kid facade hides a soul so evil that it threatens not only Carlo, but the whole town. James Robert Sinclair is a radio evangelist and cult leader whose con-man job is about to end, but not in a way he expects. Hannibal Caine is Sinclair's right-hand man, but is he also a modern Judas? UFO specialist Alexandra Manderley is drawn to the area by the strange activity but also by desires she doesn't know she has. And Sheriff Moss Baskerville must deal with all of them, and whatever is slated to occur on the day the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse ride down Thunder Road and bring about the Second Coming.

Thorne juggles over a dozen major points of view with uncommon flair in this wickedly extravagant excursion into various strange and perhaps miraculous goings-on, seamlessly shifting back and forth among them. She has steadily built a loyal following due partly to the fact that her every novel entertains with wildly paranoid, humorous, and sometimes over-the-top premises grounded by the humanity of her characters, both good and evil. Though *Thunder Road* saw life as one of the first millennium-inspired fictions (originally published in 1995), this issue proves that a good story well told will resonate whenever it appears.

—William D. Gagliani

***The Transformed Mouse: A Fable*, by Jack Ketchum; Biting Dog Press, 2003; \$100 (250-copy ltd. edition)**

With *The Transformed Mouse*, Jack Ketchum has taken a route deviating from his previous works and has introduced to

the West one of the "tales of the Pancha Tantra", written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century by Indian teachers to "instruct the different aspects of kingship for princes."

Ketchum retells the Aesop-like fable about a magi who takes a mouse for a son in a beautifully simple and yet direct manner. By the time the moral of the story is rolled out, the reader can only sigh 'ahh-hhhhhh' in agreement. Ketchum's tone is modern—"you want to watch getting Gods excited as a general rule"—and yet, like Aesop on a surfer trip, the tale's conclusive moral encapsulates the lesson into a few succinct words. "Each to each, yet all things one can be viewed as absurdly Buddhist and esoteric, or also can be seen as basally true."

Personally I would like to see Ketchum tackle a few of the other Pancha Tantra tales (eighty-seven total) in similar fashion and give readers a sense of the validity of the moral values apparent over 1,000 years ago and still true today.

Biting Dog Press has produced the work in the manner it deserves—George Walker's wood carvings are reproduced on Japanese rice paper, while the book casing is suede, tied with a mouse-like tail. Walker has worked on other Biting Dog publications and his style is fitting for the work as well as singularly striking.

If you are a Ketchum fan, this little booklet is a true collectors item.

—Kyalucia Lauwerys

***The Tyrant*, by Michael Cisco; Prime, 2003; 250 pgs.; \$29.95**

Ella is a 15-year old girl crippled by polio, a genius taking graduate courses in biology and demonstrating a strong talent for working with ectoplasm. She journeys beyond death in Michael Cisco's visionary novel *The Tyrant*. Taken as an assistant to the famed Dr. Belhoria, she'll be helping Doctor Belhoria in her study of a talented young epileptic man as he descends into a trance which will take him to the Underworld.

Cisco's prose is beyond opacity. It has a palpable density, which is apparent from beginning to end. Thus, it will take the reader a while to realize that the world within which Ella's tale unfolds is decidedly not ours. It is a Gothic, science-fictional mutant, lush, luxuriant with imagination, roots wrapped around the industrial detritus of our rotted inner-city slums. By the time you realize that you're not in the familiar world, the familiar world itself has been transformed by Cisco's prose. It's a remarkable feat as well as an interesting technique.

Not all readers will take to Cisco's prose style. Written in an acid rush of imagery, *The Tyrant* streams off the page

and beyond boundaries set by normal punctuation. For most readers it will require an effort to slip the bonds of normal storytelling and immerse themselves in Cisco's grand vision.

Cisco does nothing less in *The Tyrant* than explore the world in a manner reminiscent of Dante in 'The Inferno'. When the reader is not ensnared in Cisco's science-fiction mutation of reality, the reader is immersed in Cisco's visionary version of the afterlife. Doctor Belhoria makes a fateful decision to unleash her experimental subject, and in so doing, he becomes more than a voyager in the after-life. He becomes the Tyrant, the conqueror of lands usually outside the descriptive talents of writers—Hell, then Heaven. Cisco carries this off spectacularly, describing nightmare armies of the dead crawling, riding, screaming through the reader's consciousness. Ella embarks on a journey around the country and beyond, looking for signs of the Tyrant in Cisco's surreal version of the workaday world, encountering sigils and signs. The effect is remarkable. Cisco's plot is every bit as luxuriant as his prose.

As novels go, *The Tyrant* is packed with enough imagery for several normal books. Not a page goes by without a significant display of literary virtuosity. It's not easy to read, but it's worth the effort—if you're inclined to enjoy literary skills at the level that Cisco reaches for and consistently achieves.

Cisco is that best of writers, the risk-taker. His entire work is a gamble, which requires a patient reader but rewards that reader with a virtuoso display of writing skill. Cisco starts where normal brilliant ends, and forges his own path in the wilderness of the unknown. *The Tyrant* is like no other horror novel you're likely to find. Cisco offers style and substance in a powerful demonstration of the potential for horror implicit in the mere act of creating something that has never existed.

—Rick Kleffel

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If you have a product that you'd like to be considered for review in *Cemetery Dance*, please send copies to each of the following addresses:

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## Do you remember the exact moment your childhood ended?

1977. Jimmy Carter is elected America's 39th President. New York police apprehend the "Son of Sam," and the King of Rock n' Roll has permanently left the building. In a town called Midnight, North Carolina, twelve-year-old Kyle Mackey couldn't care less about any of that. He has his own problems to deal with, as he ventures toward a strange new world called manhood...

Kyle's older brother Dan is going away to college. Several years ago their father was killed in Viet Nam, and Mom is an alcoholic devoted more to the bottle these days than to her family. Kyle has never felt so alone. The night before Dan's flight leaves for Florida, Kyle visits what he calls his "Secret Place." All boys have a Secret Place, he believes, and his is an old shack deep in the woods bordering Midnight. Kyle's love for his Secret Place is shattered, however, when he stumbles upon something that proves his favorite spot in the world is neither as private nor innocent as he once thought...

It begins with the naked, battered corpse of a young woman.  
And, standing over her, a man Kyle Mackey knows...

# MIDNIGHT RAIN

## James Newman

MIDNIGHT RAIN is a dark coming-of-age novel in the vein of Robert McCammon's BOY'S LIFE and Joe R. Lansdale's THE BOTTOMS. It is a tale of growing up in the South, a reflection of boyhood and all its wonders, and the story of how one young man deals with a terrible secret that threatens to tear apart not only his home town but also his own family.

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